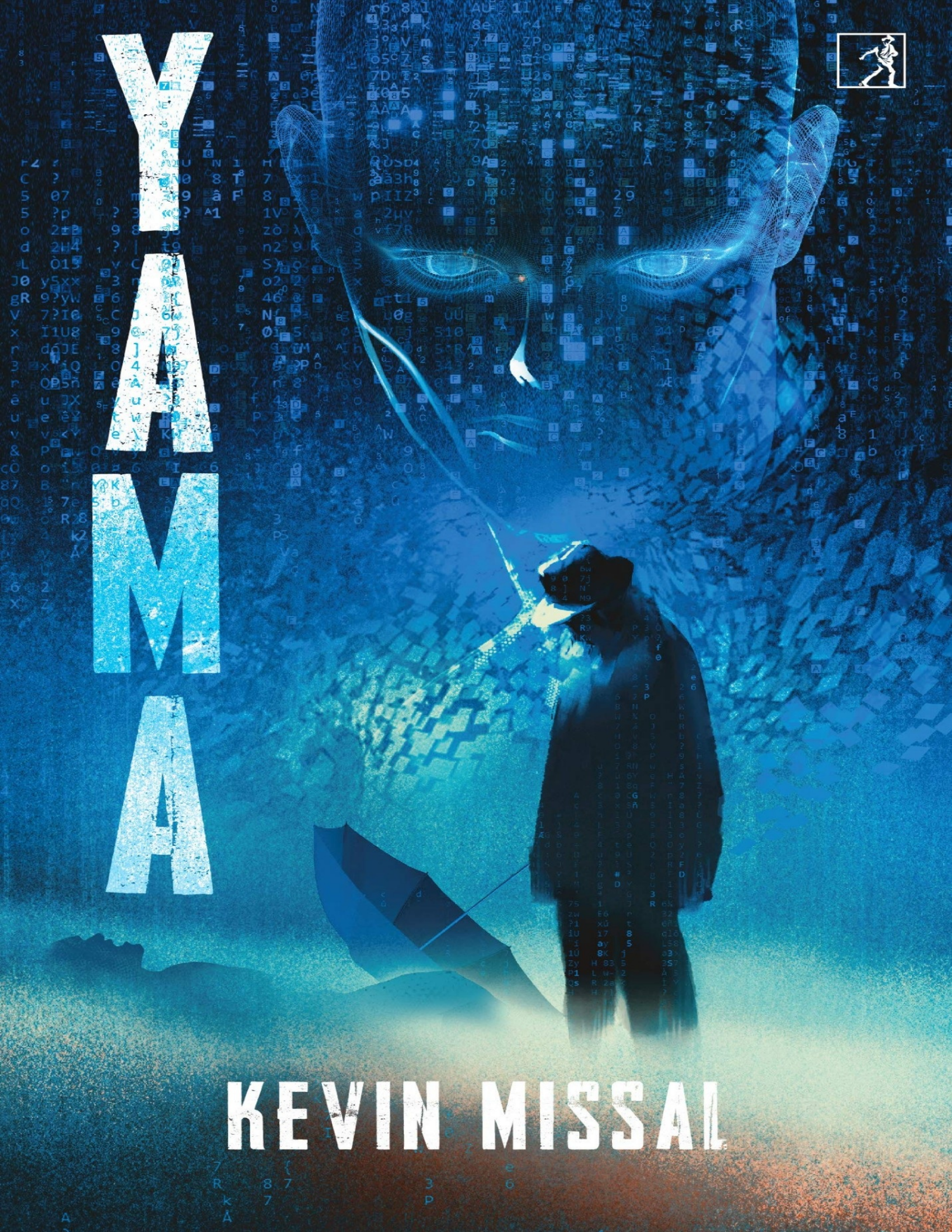
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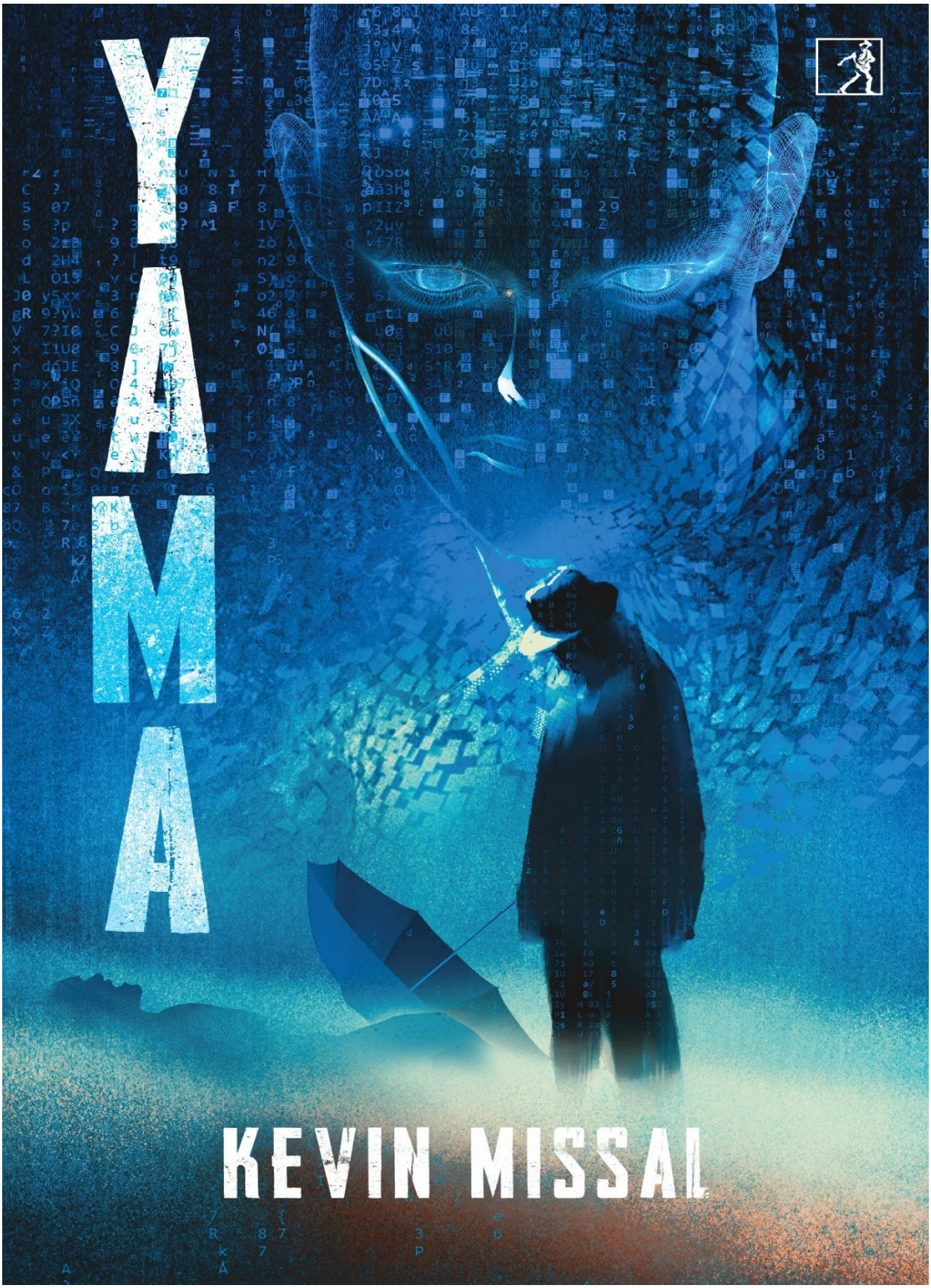
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A novel is never really the work of one person, even though that's the impression one gets when one sees the name of an author on the cover. You can even say that “Kevin Missal” is a pseudonym, for while I’m a mere writer, there are a few important people who believed/motivated/supported this writer.

I would like to name some of those people. I should start with my father. He was the believer. His name is Leslie Ojit Missal. I was twelve when I used to churn up what I now think is utterly garbage form of writing, and give it to him, and he would read it and critique it. It didn’t make sense then and it won’t make sense now, but those criticisms were what lay my foundation in writing. He believed in me constantly, helping me in producing a book, listening to ideas and promoting it with me. In short, without him I wouldn’t be here writing an acknowledgement for a book and I would have been studying engineering or medical perhaps. Or maybe as I proclaim on social media, been jobless.

The second person is Jyotsna Missal, who’s my mother. Now she never was a reader, but having her read my first book, actually felt it was quite good. It was a big pat on the back for that fourteen year old kid. And her biggest contribution is perhaps the fact that she lets me write or do anything I want to. And hence, I became a writer.

The third person is someone new. Her name is Suchismita Panda. She’s my senior in college. She’s the person who reviews my initial concepts. She has motivated me immensely to the point that I can’t be grateful in words, so I am grateful in actions. I’m a machine who churns up ideas every half an hour and I have an urge to tell someone. She’s there and she always listens carefully. I’ll be damned if there’s a day when she’ll say “I can’t listen anymore.” But because she’s too sweet, she will probably never say it to my face. Fingers crossed!

And last but not the least, I would like to thank Chetan Soni and the Half Baked Beans team for believing in me, giving this college student a chance. I would like to thank Bookbakers, who edited this book. I would also like to thank my family, relatives and friends from college and school especially Ken Kamei for helping me in the promotion. Gagan, Talween and Tanwir for assisting in promotions and a lot of others. You know who you are. I would like to thank my favorite writers. Without them, I wouldn’t have inspiration.

In the end, I want to dedicate this book to every aspiring writer out there who’s scribbling away on pages, trying to make sense of words. If I can make it, you can too.

Chapter One

The man with horns stood in the shadow.

His skin was like charcoal, as if painted, and he had fiery red eyes. He wore a helmet, with two antlers on each end, in the shape of a devil crown.

Daksh Galgotia didn't understand where he was. It seemed like he was in a dungeon or an underground cave, with his hands tied across each end of the wall. He didn't remember most of what happened except the huge slam on his head that had knocked him out.

As he regained consciousness, he saw the man with the horns and he hadn't quite seen anything like that- even in his worst nightmares.

The figure was tall and lanky with long hands and thin fingers from which jutted serrated nails. His charcoal skin gleamed against the lingering moonlight that found its way through a small window with iron grills.

The walls had long and vivid paintings of a figure being sacrificed to the fire while others depicted people being trampled by a huge red skinned figure. All of it had some sort of a chalk drawing and god knows how many walls were covered with such art.

Daksh was in his full senses and using that advantage for himself, he pulled the ropes as quickly and strongly he could, but in vain. The ropes were tied tightly to the walls and to the ground, leaving him with no choice but to look straight at the figure.

"Why are you doing this to me?" He cried.

The man with horns didn't respond. Rather, he just danced his fingers in mid air, while grunting under his heavy breath.

"I have lots of money. Take it. It's all yours. Just take it." Stinging tears coursed down his cheeks. He was a man and it was hard for him to cry, but here, stuck helpless in front of a shadowy, silent figure made him realize about all the things he had done wrong in his life.

Images flashed in front of him of his crimes, the old people and the houses. He was a realtor and the owner of many houses in Gurgaon that he gave out to oldies, especially the ones above seventy who had been disowned by their progeny. He would let them rent the flat for a small price, letting them take the bait without putting them through the confusion of paperwork and after one year, he would surge up the prices, causing them to fumble around with their purses

and bank accounts. After becoming comfortable in their new, furnished apartments, they had no choice but to agree to the new prices. He did it because they were weak and easy to manipulate. He earned a living out of these old people, though it gave him bad dreams at night. He would often meander through the valleys of his conscience, trying to find some morality in what he did.

He was reminded of all those things as he now stared at the chalk drawings around him—the one where a devil like shape was burning a man in a cauldron, and another where a noose is hung around the man, tied to a branch over a bonfire. They were all created with different coloured chalks and the crimson colour in all the drawings was rather dark and grim.

It's blood.

The horror seized his chest as if someone had punctured a hole inside him, plunged a blade into it and cut the edges to reveal a gaping hole.

"P-lease." He could feel the trickling of his sweat and tears, "I…am…who are you?" He didn't even know what to ask the figure.

The man with horns came forward, revealing his black skin and his eyes, which were so red that he could see his own blood mirrored in them. His teeth were bare and yellow and he wore a cloth in red and yellow, wound around his waist. The long and sharp horns on his helmet mortified Daksh.

"Yama," he snarled.

Yama?

Of course, he knew who Yama was. He was the god of death or the god of justice, who would come on his buffalo and take away the soul of a dead person tied to the noose that he carried with him. He also had a staff, yet this man, who claimed he was a god, had not one weapon on him.

But he doesn't need them.

"Where…where am I?" He struggled.

"*Naraka* , Hell" he replied, stressing on every word.

"What are you going to do to me?" He said, gritting his teeth now, hoping for an answer.

Daksh knew that in this situation, instead of weeping and begging, he should resort to a more calm and understanding approach.

"Nothing," Yama said.

“Nothing? What do you want then? Everyone wants something. What do you want?”

Yama shook his head as he parted his dry lips and showed his blood red tongue.

“Justice,” he said calmly.

Chapter Two

I have not heard anything as stupid as the name- Tapasva Gandhi.

He's my psychiatrist, a man with a bony skull and a shaved head. I don't know what he writes on the pad in his hand, leaning back in his chair. I often wonder what these psychiatrists write. Do they make doodles while they listen to our rants and complaints all day long?

But, I'm just distracting myself. He had asked me a question.

"Yes, I dream," I respond.

He looks up. He doesn't look weary from my usual complaints. I come to him every fifteen days, sometimes even ten or five, when I am deeply troubled though we end up talking more about my parents and my army life. It's the nightmares. I would say they are memories manifesting into reality sometimes, and I see them up close in front of me, almost touching me.

"What do you dream about?"

"About my army days," I reply, swallowing a lump. Am I now afraid to open up about my past even though I have done it quite a few times before?

"What do you think about during those army days?"

I slump in my chair with my fingers crisscrossing over my trousers of my dark open collared suit. "You know what I think about, doctor."

"Tell me again." He's at the opposite end of the room, behind his desk. It's not like in the movies where a patient has a comfy sofa or a narrow bed, where he can lie down and talk about things. In real world, it's an armed chair in a lit up room with walls covered with the achievements of Dr. Tapasva Gandhi.

"I was a Black Cat Commando on probation and stationed in Srinagar during the nineties."

"How many years?"

"Four," I say.

He scribbles.

"What did you experience there?"

"Blood, war, militants, insurgency," I reply, wiping my forehead. It's not hot. There is an AC but it's not affecting me.

"Did you kill anyone out there?"

I roll my eyes. “What kind of a question is that?”

Tapasva didn’t fidget. His expressions are normal as he places the pad down on the table. “It’s an important ‘kind of question’.”

“I did kill, for your knowledge. I killed four people.”

“What had happened?”

I close my eyes. What really happened? I was called Kabir back then. It was important to gel with the Kashmiris, so we had to choose names according to their culture. I had a gun in my hand and a pistol against my thighs. Three of the militants died on the same day but the fourth one ran away. He sprinted to a small cabin where I followed him with an AK-47. I shot his leg first and while he struggled to get up, I searched the cabin for bombs of any sort or any weapons, but the cabin was empty except for a woman and a daughter. They were, perhaps, his family and they hid in the corner, whimpering and clutching each other.

I did what I had to do. I dragged him outside, pulling the collars of his thick jacket and making sure that we were out of the family’s sight. I threw him down on the snow aiming my gun over his head. He was telling me he wasn’t a militant but I knew he was. I had seen him in the fields. I did what I had to do, regardless of his family. I shot him through his head and a crimson pool formed over the thick snow. I talked on the radio set, ordering other comrades to come to my coordinates, to pick up the body and question the family. As I waited there with the dead body, my eyes were drawn to the frightened wife and daughter, who stood against the door, sobbing for their loss.

“Do you dream about that death?”

“I have been dreaming of them lately.”

“Why didn’t you dream about them earlier?”

I sigh. “I don’t know. I guess, at that time being a commando and living the life of commando had made me so prone to deaths, that the idea of killing someone didn’t trouble me. I didn’t care. I would go back, drink some booze, joke with other *faujis* and be done for the day. But today, when I see my hands, I see blood on them.”

“Now, you are getting all agitated. Are the memories coming back to you?”

I frown. “That’s what I said, didn’t I?” I tap my fingers on the desk. “What do I have?”

He raises his brows. “What?”

I scoff mockingly. “I must have something, right? Some mental problem, something like post traumatic stress, etc?”

“Tell me about your family.”

I lean back, as my fingers go numb and I feel this dryness over my lips all of a sudden. I don’t like this guy. I never did. And yet I come back to him. I think his way of asking questions have hooked me. His predatory eyes have grabbed hold of my soul and now he just twirls it around like a ballerina.

“You’ve never asked me this question.”

“Well,” he says, “I ask you now.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel your problems must be originating from your current personal life as well.”

“You mean my personal life is triggering all those memories?” I shift uneasily, ready to abuse the shit out of him, as he calmly traces his finger across his forehead in a thoughtful posture, grabbing my attention.

“We can only know if you tell me.”

“I have a wife. I have a daughter and I have a son.”

“You are allowed to be more specific, Mr. Rajpoot.”

I flick my tongue around the inner flesh of my cheek, feeling the rawness, as I prepare myself to tell him about the people I’m supposed to feel happy with. “I have a wife. Her name is Rutvi Rajpoot. She is a housewife. And she suffers from schizophrenia.”

“Is she on medication?”

“Mostly sleeping pills, Schizopen.”

“When you are not there, who takes care of her?”

“The maid, Meena.”

“How many times does she have an episode in a week?”

“Her episodes range from three to six days.”

“What do you do when she has her episode?”

“I give her the sleeping pills.”

“What does she think of?”

“Death,” I answer. “She hears death, she says.”

“Do you believe her?”

I flare my nostrils, signalling my reluctance to respond. He continues his questions. “What about your daughter?”

“She’s fancy. We are going this week to fix her marriage with the guy she likes.”

“Do you like her choice?”

I frown and shrug. It’s the same thing that I had been doing for quite some time during this interrogation. “I find him unsettling but if he hurts my daughter, I’ll make sure I’ll dance over his bones and blood.”

He sighed.

“You love your daughter?”

“I love my entire family.”

“What is her name?”

“Tara.”

“That’s a nice name,” he smiles.

This is the first time I’ve seen him smiling.

“What about your son?”

“Sarang—well he’s... uh, he’s a nice guy. He’s in his first year of college. He’s not into drugs. I’m good at finding stuff. He’s not even peer pressured, and he is good at studies and stuff. ”

“But you have some sort of problem with him?”

I purse my lips. Tapasva is damn good at reading expressions, I see. “He bullies.”

“Who?”

“Everyone.”

“And have you talked about it to him?”

“Yes. He says it’s harmless. But I don’t know what he’s doing, you know, in reality.”

Tapasva nods.

“What about your job? We talked about it in the last session,” he begins to open

up his diary, leather bound with a metallic strap to bind it, as he goes through his jottings. When he finally finds it, he taps it twice with a hint of triumphant smile covering his face. “You were working for your friend, Gagan, right?”

“Yeah, he was a *fauji* too. He owns the thing.”

“And you were working in an investigative and security agency called Panthers,”

“It’s a big firm. I’m just one of the many senior employees he has, who look after exclusive cases.”

“What does Panthers specialize in?”

“We are the best twenty four hour service at a good cost. We mostly serve companies and help them in identity proofing, missing persons, you know - the usual. We also provide them with our guards and equipments such as cameras and mics. It’s a big company and I’m just a small part of it.”

“Do you serve privately?”

“Only high profiles ones. The rich, you know, while the lower investigators serve the less costly ones.”

“Do you get to have adventures?” A thin grin comes up. I must be having a lucky day.

I laugh. I liked my job and I liked to talk about it. First of all, Gagan Tufir was a good friend of mine, so I had no hefty chairman issues to deal with. Then, I got a decent pay and some tantalizing cases such as divorces and loyalty tests and fifty percent as profit sharing. What was there to not like?

“Coming back to your army days…” he begins, causing my mind to go back into that gully of rotten dreams as I patiently listen to him, “who you killed…do you think, um, that he was innocent?”

“He was in the war zone. I followed him from there.”

“But wasn’t that war zone was in a market? There must be a lot of civilians there.”

“Not at the time of shooting.”

“So, when you asked the militant’s family, what did they say?”

I swallow a huge lump. “They said he was innocent….” I couldn’t do it; I couldn’t sit there and listen to this garbage. “What are you implying here?”

“I’m not implying anything,”

“Listen, I got a gallantry award for killing four terrorists. You listen to that?

Those were terrorists. Those were mad people hell bent on protecting what they thought was right. I was the hero there."

"I don't doubt that."

I get to my feet with a jerk, "Then, what are you implying here?"

"I believe that you subconsciously think that you have killed an innocent and that is why you have nightmares."

I clench my teeth. "How much do I have to pay you?" I suppress all the filthy Hindi abuses that I want to blurt out at him, pay him his fifteen hundred rupees and decide to be on my way.

I storm out of the small room, which was in the basement of his big bungalow in New Rajinder Nagar. He was the best, they said, and that he was rich enough to make others pay to say that he was the best. I ascend the stairs, leading myself out. I sit in my Chevrolet Cruze and drive away

I look into the rear view mirror and see a bearded man wearing a cap with blood splattered over his jacket, smiling at me as he made himself comfortable in the back seat.

Chapter Three

When I reached home, the first thing I saw was that I had got a letter.

I never get letters. We live in a world of technology and letters are the last thing I expect, so I ignored it, tossing it into my file drawer of my office. My office was in my apartment, just for the sake of my wife, Rutvi, so that I could take care of her and my work at the same time. While my son mostly stays out till seven because of his college and his civil service exam tuitions, my daughter also has work in her taxation firm, which in effect means that I get time alone with my client, though I interact with most of my clients over the phone. The others, I would interact over e-mails, etc. Gagan didn't mind me working from home because he was interested in delivered results and till such time I got him the results, he didn't care where I worked from.

I see my nephew, Vardhaan, solving crossword in the Delhi Times, with his legs over his desk. He wasn't really part of Panthers. He was just an intern, if you call dozing around and making paper airplanes interning. He was in the third year of St. Stephen's college, son of my sister and a complete brat. But I had to give him the job because he was damn intelligent, knowledgeable and also because he was my nephew. He hadn't helped me in any case manually as most of them just needed clicking few numbers and names over the computer. Technology had indeed helped in investigating a lot of things.

I scold him for not being more professional as he hurriedly corrects his posture, keeping the paper on his desk that's opposite to mine. I then go to Rutvi's room to check on her. She's snoring and I'm happy that she is well. When you have a person who suffers from auditory schizophrenia episodes, sleep is the best medicine as it calms down the nerves and one wakes up fresh.

I go back to the office that is basically a big store room. It has books on shelves and portraits of my grandfather and great grandfather on the wall, two desks, four chairs, two computers, and a laptop, marble tiles on the floor and a high ceiling and even a money plant in the corner.

"What's up?"

"There's a client coming over."

"Why didn't you just handle it over the phone?"

Vardhaan juts out his conical jaw as he says, "I tried to but she insisted on meeting you in person. She said that she knows Gagan personally and that he has recommended you."

Damn these private cases that comes along with wanting to meet and talk! I didn't have time. Well, honestly, I did have time but I chose to spend it over multi-national company deals over security managements, theft investigation, credit worthiness, asset verification or even legal services. This gives you more money, power and contacts. But somehow, Gagan believes I'm good for private cases, helping divorcees find claim over their husband's money and what not.

"What did you do the entire day?"

"Hacked," he grins. Oh yes, and he's a brilliant ethical hacker, though he got caught once by the Delhi Police and had to be bailed. After that, his parents had restricted WiFi at his house.

"What did you hack?" I go and sit behind my desk as I look through the folders of the cases that I had yet to examine. I often get cases to review and make sure who gets promotions and who does not.

"An expensive game for free," he grins.

I shrug my shoulders as I look away from the files and square my eyes to freeze with his. "Who was the woman who called?"

"A hot shot," he says as he goes through his yellow page pad, "Some popular realtor's wife."

"Popular realtor?"

"Oh yeah, Daksh Galgotia."

Chapter Four

Mrs. Galgotia comes into the living room and looks around as if scanning the room for any germs or dirt. She frowns at the sight of my maid, Meena who has buck teeth and wears multicoloured saree in contrast to Mrs. Galgotia, whose sari is all ivory and crystal. She walks over to the couch and as she places her big bottom over it, squeezing the leather, she orders Meena to fetch her glass of water. She smells of exquisite perfume and wears her expensive Dolce and Gabbana shades.

But I could see from the corner of her eyes that she did this not out of style, but to actually hide her dark eye-bags. The woman hadn't slept for many days.

Vardhaan is leaning against the wall with a diary in his hand. He always carries one, no matter how tech savvy he is, and does not rely on his phone that switches off whenever it wants. Perhaps, he takes after that habit from his mother, who used to make small chits of notes when she was small.

Mrs. Galgotia glimmers in her clothes, the makeup, and the perfectly braided hair. Anyone could easily characterize her as the "*ameer khandan ki bahu"* or the "rich bride".

"I am, uh, I am Iravan Rajpoot and this is my secretary, Vardhaan Sippy," I say and notice Vardhaan frowning at being introduced as a secretary.

She doesn't even glance at Vardhaan. Her lipstick, so red and thick, gleams in the light of my room and a few strands of her hair fall over her fat face. She wasn't pretty, but she was trying to be.

She waits for a while, staring at the walls, before she speaks, "Can I smoke?"

I wouldn't have allowed her, but she doesn't wait for my approval and pulls out a pack of mint cigarettes from her Zara bag. She lights one up, and says, "I told my PA to wait in the car." I don't know why she told me that, but the lady had a PA? God. "I suppose you can you tell your assistant to wait out as well."

"Don't worry, he works on my cases. He's actually the tech behind it."

"I don't doubt his competence, but I feel attacked by his presence."

She knew how to say things. I had no choice then but to wave him away. He shrugs and leaves for the store room, but I know he would be eavesdropping.

"Can we talk now?"

"I have been told you are good at adultery and loyalty cases."

That’s what I get mostly. I am good at everything—patent checking, following around and stuff, pre and post employment proofing. But I get the damn relationships.

“Do you want me to check if your husband is cheating on you?”

She pulls her cigarette from her mouth and puts it in the ashtray on the table that’s right in front of her and says, “What makes you think he’s cheating on me?”

“You have dark circles under your eyes. You are worried. And you asked me about adultery, so you know - logic.” A clever smile spreads over my face.

“I asked you because I want to know how good you are at solving missing person cases?”

I squeeze my eyes, narrowing them in puzzlement. I didn’t do a lot of missing person; in fact, I solely assisted rather than go full on investigating. “What do you mean?”

“My husband is missing, Mr. Rajpoot, and I want you to find him.”

Chapter Five

“Since when?”

“It’s been three days,” she spills the ash over the table. Mrs. Galgotia clearly is not a clean person, no matter how hard she tries to portray it externally. “He doesn’t go out. He’s a realtor. He stays in the country; rather he stays in the city, except for the parties he goes for.”

“Are you sure he’s missing?”

“He didn’t take his phones. His PA has no idea of his whereabouts and his clients are waiting for him to revert. And he never makes them wait.”

“What do the police say?”

“I haven’t approached them,” she starkly responds.

“Why?”

“Because he told me so.”

“Daksh told you not to approach police when he’s missing?”

“ This conversation had taken place a long time back. I take seriously whatever he says. He said that if ever he went off the radar, it’ll be because his rivals or enemies have taken him in and he didn’t want the police to pull secrets out of his bag.”

I arch my brows as I ask the difficult question. “Was he doing illegal stuff?”

“He made sure his tenants didn’t sign a document, so, you can say, it’s sort of illegal.”

“But why would they go into a house where they don’t have to sign a document?”

“Because they are desperate and the houses are cheap and too beautiful for them to bother about the formalities. After one year, he gives them the document with increased prices and they don’t really have a choice but sign it and give him the money.”

That was a clever tactic of making money. And a ruthless way too. The fear that the police will find him taking advantage of such people could force him to shut down his business and send him to jail. This was the reason she didn’t want Vardhaan to be in the room. She didn’t want the little business loopholes to be known to many people. I had an investigator-client confidentiality and Vardhaan

being an intern, didn't. He could spread whatever he wanted to.

"So, I decided to come to a private agency."

"I see."

"Your rates have been decided by Gagan." She pulls out a white parcel out of her bag and keeps it on the table, right next to the ash. "This is pre-emptive. The other half, I'll give when I'll get my husband."

"Do you know where I can find him, any guesses?" I raise brows. "Do you know anything of his rivals or anything that you might think gives me a good lead?"

"I wasn't much into his business."

I flick my tongue against the inner cheek, as I thoughtfully muse for another option. "I would like to check his files. You can give them to me in a hard drive or something. I need a person who knew him really well, professionally I mean."

"I'll send over Pritika to you."

"Pritika?"

"His PA," she says with a frown. Clearly, she didn't like her. "She'll bring over whatever you need. I'll give her the address and your number. She'll meet you soon as she's much more worried for him than me and she would want to start this as soon as possible." She says acidly and then gets to her feet.

She walks out of the room without saying a word but leaving the ash and the money behind her.

Chapter Six

“She’s a bitch,” Vardhaan says as he enters the room with his diary clinging against his light blue, rolled up shirt.

“Mind your language,” I snap at him.

He sighs. “What did she want?”

I tell him everything regardless of the confidentiality concern. I couldn’t hide it from Vardhaan as I wanted his help in this. “I want you to find everything that you could on this Daksh Galgotia guy. I want no stone unturned. Cool?”

“Sure, boss,” he grins. “You mean I have to hack, right?”

He knew what I wanted from him, but I didn’t want to say it to him. I just shrug and leave the room to enter my office to go through folders and sit comfortably on my chair, while I think about what next to do. Vardhaan works on his laptop, pressing buttons, adding a keyboard, a hard drive, some pen drives, a CD and what not. After a while of flipping around, he says-

“Old people aren’t happy with him.”

“What do you mean?” I walk up to him while he shifts his laptop to show me a news article which featured an old couple giving an interview about their latest flat hunting experience and how they met Daksh Galgotia, who screwed them up. “He attacks the old.”

“The easiest,” he says, “There are seventy five percent households where grannies and grandpas are kicked out of their houses. They are desperate. They get these homes. They don’t care about the paperwork and bam! That’s how he earns.”

“What is it?”

“Buried news,” he responds, “Our guy, apparently, has contact in the print.”

“He’s influential,” I nod. “It must be one of his customer’s young babies taking revenge. Does he do something else other than just this? I mean, he can’t earn all of his income with just this, right?”

He presses around buttons and stuff and finally comes up with an e-magazine hate piece on Daksh. After reading it a little, Vardhaan says, “He sells faulty homes too. It’s not always that he plays around with oldies. He shows the young crowd beautiful setups and when they sign the paper, they get to see the reality —the leakage, the electricity problems, the cracks on the tile that was hidden by

the carpet, all sort of thing. And they have a three year tenancy which means they can't go back and can't sue him because he has amazing lawyers. Basically, he sells bad houses that are worth nothing but he sells it at amazing prices with a little touch up."

"How many flats does he own in totality?"

"Only in Gurgaon, the rising ones."

"He must be having a lot of enemies."

"Yes," Vardhan pushes his specs up. "And many of them would want to have a piece of him."

I run my fingers over my crew cut. I never really had long hair because if I did, my bald spots become visible as my hair is wavy and greasy in texture when it grows. I even have a beard, stubble to be precise, with a prominent moustache. Facial hair has always been something that I've liked.

"Any news on a person standing against him or something or a family suing him?"

He clicks a few buttons and shakes his head. "Nup."

Whoever must be holding him must have a grudge or something. I go to my office after I order Vardhaan to send all the information over to me. I get it on my mail, which I open and read thoroughly. To write the keywords, I begin searching for a pen, only to open the drawer and find one right next to the mail I got in the morning.

I open the letter and go through it but there is nothing written in it except a few words.

Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell.

Time: 24 hours.

Name: Daksh Galgotia.

Chapter Seven

Daksh woke up at the sound of screeching talons and saw Yama, the heinous creature, standing in front of him. His hands and feet were caked with dried blood and he was thirsty and hungry, with lions roaring in his stomach. He was given three sips of water and a loaf of bread, which Yama stuffed inside his mouth to ensure that he wouldn't die of hunger.

He wants me alive.

The thought had surfaced a few hours back, and it surfaced again. *What does this maniac want from me?* He wanted to ask but his answer only turns out to be "Justice" and he has no other choice but to reflect over the things that he had done.

He could feel his body becoming weak from dehydration and starvation. And every night, whenever Yama used to pay his last visit, he would come over to Daksh and whip him all over his body. He could see the long and deep scars on his body, visible through his ripped shirt.

And now as well, he was there with his whip. Daksh swallowed down the surging bile and begged to be spared but the man with horns didn't listen. He lashed it right across his chest again, propelling a surging pain through his bones and muscles. Another lash led to numbness after the pain. And he just didn't stop. He kept going until his wounds started oozing blood once again.

"WHY!" he screamed.

"Justice."

Justice.

Chapter Eight

I didn't think of that letter until now. It's strange and eerie. A letter came to me about Daksh Galgotia and his wife comes to me too. Is this some elaborate scheme being played by Gagan where he wants to test my competence? But he had never done this before. This is new. This must be a prank and I'm over thinking about it.

I see Rutvi sleeping late. We had talked last night about her health and her delusions. Ever since she has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, that was all she ever talked about. Death was on her mind. She says she doesn't see shimmering apparitions, but hears things.

"He says that if I don't kill myself, he'll kill all of you."

"Death can't touch me and I won't let him touch any of you," I reply.

She wasn't assured and I don't blame her. It's been three years now and she believed that unknown voice rather than a person in flesh and bones.

I drink my tea in my boxers and a white vest, while I study myself in front of the mirror. I have developed a small tummy. I don't have the same thick arms I used to, and my calves are weak too. I could be easily beaten up now. I used to look for fights earlier, but now, I run from them. Time changes things. I get ready, wearing my usual gray suit after taking a bath and trimming my moustache. Vardhaan comes in his usual shirt and pant with a laptop back pack. He sets himself down in the office while I wait for Pritika.

She had called me earlier in the morning requesting to meet. I agreed. She must be bringing files and a whole lot of secrets along with her. While she does so, I get the time to think about the reason behind Daksh's disappearance. Categorizing it as a rival or an enemy's enmity wasn't enough; I feel I might have to go broader than that. He had pissed a lot of tenants over the years, getting away and then bringing new customers and doing the same thing over again. But what if it's not one of those tenants? What if it's more than just that? During our training as commandos, it wasn't just sprucing us up physically, it was mental too. They had taught us that what you see can have a lot of dimensions. By seeing, you are just scratching one of them.

What if it's a case about something bigger—mafia, pimps, and drugs? What if it's the work of a serial kidnapper? But that's just rare in India, especially in Delhi. Women get taken away, not men. That was how our lowlife worked. If it's not female, it's not their work.

I toss all of these thoughts on the side as I open the door after two knocks. Standing opposite to me in knee length skirt with a striped shirt and a teal coloured coat, she smiles weakly. She's petite, small, with cat-glasses, fair complexion and narrow lips.

"I'm Pritika Tokas," she says.

"Come in."

She kneels down to grab the two boxes that I had failed to notice. I instantly give her a hand, taking both of them and keeping them on the living room table. I ask her for water, she shakes her head. I call Vardhaan, and as I do, I see Vardhaan and Pritika exchange some really surprised glances before Vardhaan excuses himself.

"I have some work," he says and leaves.

The surprising thing is that he never has work. She awkwardly shifts on the couch before she looks up at me. I hope to ask her about Vardhaan and why there was this weird exchange, but I dismiss. I have to be professional, after all.

"So, you are Mr. Galgotia's assistant?"

"The only one. He never used to have a lot of people around him."

I look over at the files. They were all stacked in the brown box in multicoloured folders. I dread the thought of me working every file, staring at it for a while before tossing it back in the box. Investigating is the most boring thing you can do when there's no field work. And apparently, there wasn't right now.

"Can you tell me anything about him?"

She behaves as if I asked her a bizarre question. "Didn't Mrs. Galgotia tell you?"

Actually, she didn't even give me a chance to talk.

"Yeah, she did. I want to know from you too."

"He was a nice man, rather funny and brave. He was really brave. He had earned a black belt in Karate. It was a sort of past time, a hobby of his. He liked to be strong and manipulative, for he believed he could be attacked any time."

"So, he anticipated something might happen to him?"

"Who doesn't, right?"

She is right. I still feel, as if a shadow from my past would come to wreck things.

"Did you see him squabbling over the phone or is there anything else that you know that might help me?"

She nods with a deep exhalation. “I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“It can help me,” I insist.

She slouched, “He was having a conversation with the Tripathis. You see, Mr. Tripathi was a general in the Indian Army, so when Mr. Galgotia did what he usually does, Mr. Tripathi caught on and threatened to kill him.”

“How old is Mr. Tripathi?”

“In his sixties.”

“When did this happen?”

“Right before his disappearance,” her hands place over her knee as she pulled down her long skirt as if building up a defence mechanism, “and after he was done with the conversation, he said some nasty words. You see, Mr. Galgotia was not a religious man. In fact, he was an atheist and Mr. Tripathi believed in gods, in life and death, and he worshipped everyone. Mr. Galgotia just shouted blasphemous statements about his religion and how he worships Rigvedic gods and what not.”

Huh? That is odd.

“Thank you, Pritika,” I glance over at the boxes, “Care to tell me which one is Mr. Tripathi’s file?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you put it in a hard drive?”

“Mr. Galgotia had a phobia with technical things. He thinks robots will win if we do this.” A weak smile shows up again.

I shake her hands and politely say bye, when she freezes. “You don’t want my help?” she asks.

“I, uh, I don’t, actually.”

“I can help you sort your files. I’m fast at it. He hired me because I am fast at doing things.”

“You don’t have to. You don’t have to worry, Pritika. We will find, Mr. Galgotia.”

“But…” her voice trails when I say bye and close the door. I didn’t want a girl working with me all day long. In fact, I didn’t even have the time to look through every file, so I passed it to Vardhaan.

“What’s with you and the PA?” I ask.

He looks up from the files scattered over his desk. “We used to date.”

Vardhaan never used to talk to me about his dating life, probably because he thought I would tell his mother, but I had no wish to meddle into the squabbles of a mother and son.

“That was a lucky coincidence.”

“Too lucky.”

“You think she knew you worked here so she came?”

“She’s a crazy chick.”

“She seems nice.”

“To other people— but she troubled the hell outta me, calling me always, ‘Babu, sleeping kya?’ or ‘Babu, I love you’. It was going out of control. I needed space. I needed to hang out. I couldn’t take that anymore. And I was never a relationship kind of guy, so I broke off. She cried that I broke her heart and stuff but it was done.”

“If you knew you weren’t the relationship kinds, why were you in a relationship?” I ask.

He coughs, arches his brow and resumes work. He had no answer for that and he never will. Vardhaan was a carefree guy and commitment phobic apparently.

“You found anything?”

“I did. Mr. Tripathi is one loose screw.”

“As in?”

He holds up a file as he reads, “So, our boy, Galgotia has a background check of every customer of his. It turns out that Mr. Tripathi is a religious Hindu fanatic because during the seventies, he was shot by a Pakistani soldier. But the bullet missed him and gave him a flesh wound close to his rib cage. He believed Lord Yama saved him from it, saying Yama didn’t want his soul for he was meant to do greater things here.” He gives me the medical reports, “Galgotia was really strict about knowing everything about the customer, perhaps, to exploit their weakness and stuff, so he used to dig up literally everything about them from every source he had.”

“Yama?” I narrow my eyes. “The god of death?”

“And justice. He punishes the sinners,”

I pull out the envelope that I had got and unwrap it to read it again: *Find the hell*

to his sin and the sin to his hell.

“I got this.”

He reads it and his eyes widen. “Damn. Why didn’t you show me this earlier?”

“I thought it was a prank or something but now that you say it, it does make sense. Mr. Tripathi thinks of himself as Yama. He is a General. He has military tactics to apprehend the guy. I’ve seen army men in sixties, fit and fine. He thinks he is executing justice by punishing Daksh Galgotia’s for his sins of cheating and taking money from the downtrodden. It does make sense now.” I had joined a lot of farfetched puzzles, making a disjointed result.

“And it says twenty four hours…that means…”

“I think what you mean...”

“It does, right?” He chews on his lips, excitedly. “But why did he send you that? And what does he mean by ‘hell’? What did he mean by that?”

“We need to find that by asking him,”

“Will you call the police?”

“We don’t have any proof.” We could contact them on the basis of our suspicion but I didn’t want to. Adrenaline pumps hard as I begin to think of all the possibilities of the encounter and I liked the one where I mete out justice by shooting Tripathi in the head. “We have to go solo.”

“I’m coming, I’ll stay in the car, promise,” He pleads.

I nod as I go over to the cabinet that is adjacent to the desk. I pull out a yellow leather box. I unlock it and take out a small pistol from it. It’s heavy but powerful. I feel energy and a sense of power creep into me as I hold the gun in my hand. In the box, there’s also a holster that I fit on my belt. I load the pistol with six bullets and stack it in the holster while concealing the weapon with my coat.

“Do we have an address?”

“We do. It’s the address of his flat where he is Galgotia’s tenant. I’m not sure if he is staying there though.” He scribbles in his diary. “We also have a number.”

“Check with the Truecaller app.”

He dials the number in the app and it blinks flashy. He looks up and he’s grinning foolishly. “The number’s showing its location in Gurgaon.”

I nod and look at my watch. I shows 3pm. “I got the letter at four in the evening

yesterday.”

“Whatever he’s going to do with Daksh, he’s going to do it in one hour.”

An hour.

One hour.

Chapter Nine

I drive like a maniac, zigzagging through traffic and jumping all the traffic lights as I make my way to Gurgaon.

“Did you call Tripathi?”

“I did,” Vardhaan sighs. “He’s not picking.”

“Damn!” I slam my fists against the wheel.

“We should call the police.”

I take a sharp right turn that causes Vardhaan to swoon over to my side and fall on my lap. Awkwardly, he picks himself back into position and buckles up.

“I warned you.” I wink.

He says, “We should call the police.”

“Not unless we are sure.”

“But…”

I shoot a glance at Vardhaan. “We don’t have time to contact the Haryana police. By the time we try and make them understand, Daksh could be dead.”

“Dead?” His voice goes squeaky. “I don’t like dead. I hate blood.”

And I love it.

“Do you really think Tripathi is killing Daksh?”

“He’s given us the time and even the name. The coincidence is too uncanny to be considered a coincidence.”

“But he also wrote something weird.”

“We need to ask him about that ourselves.”

I drive past cars, missing by inches. In the process, I ram into the rear bumper of a car, shocking the driver, who proceeds to hurl filthy abuses at us. But I don’t have the time to stop and apologise.

“How much time do we have?”

He looks at his dinosaur wristwatch, which he considers lucky for some reason. “You won’t like it.”

“Say it.” I turn the car into the long, wide lanes of the Nirvana colony which was a small city in itself. That was how Gurgoan was built like and had many

cities within cities.

“It’s…uh…we have five minutes.”

“How far is the house?”

“Ten minutes away.”

Chapter Ten

He heard it. It was the sound of roaring engines. He smiled at himself. He was here. He was finally here. He wasn't in his usual attire though. He had dressed up in a black kurta and loose jeans. He didn't wear the paint on himself or even his crown. It was all kept safely underground.

He tapped his fingers on the couch as he waited for the door bell to ring. A small smile danced around his lips as he looked at the package that was to be delivered. And delivered, it should be. It was in a white parcel, clearly stapled and taped neatly. It was the way he sent *him* .

He stared at his reflection on the sheen of the glass table. He could see how frail he was without his attire. He seemed lonely and desperate. He wanted to get back into his skin. Yes. That was his skin. Who he was now, the real him according to those around him, wasn't real for him. This was his mask but the paint and the crown and the weapons were all part of him and his spirit, swirling in an ocean of his consciousness. That was real. This bright, white skin with his bony exterior, a full mouth, trimmed nails were all too humane and human.

And he was anything but human. He was a god, the god of justice.

The door bell rang and his smile broadened.

Chapter Eleven

I ring the bell again and step back to actually take in the apartment. It was a bungalow divided in three parts and there was an external staircase to go on each floor. Tripathi's apartment had been on the third one, looking ordinary as ever.

"Does he have a Mrs.Tripathi?"

"Yeah."

"How does he do it then?" I ask.

Vardhaan just shrugs. "I think he does it when she's asleep."

I begin responding to him when the door opens and I see a wrinkled old lady, in her nighty, staring at us through her high powered spectacles that made her eyes seem like twice the size.

"Yes?" she says in a weak voice. "I apologize for my lateness. It takes time, you see."

"Hello ma'am." I immediately put up a smile, concealing my surprise. "Can we talk to Mr. Tripathi?"

"Sure, sure, he's sleeping, what is the work about, young man?"

"I'm here to talk about Daksh Galgotia. He's been missing for few days."

"Oh," she howls as she allows me and Vardhaan inside. "He was not nice man, but... um... I don't think you would know."

"I don't know what?"

I then realize why she allowed me to enter her apartment. There was a small television at the end of the room on which the news was playing.

"It came out just now, few minutes back." she pauses as I glue myself to the television, muttering in my thoughts *no, no, no.* "He was not a good man, but not even the devil should suffer such fate…"

I lose the trail of her words as I see images popping up on the TV and I hear Vardhaan gasping. The image isn't gruesome or scary but the news being read sends shivers down my spine:

"Two kids, while playing cricket, found a body outside Ambience Mall, Gurgaon. Our reporter, Swati Kaushik, was the first one there with her cameraman. We are the first ones to get the visuals of the corpse." There is a cut to a visual in which a shaking camera shows a dead body, dumped in a trash can,

being pulled out by the police forensic team. Suddenly, one police man appears before the camera and pushes the cameraman, hurling abuses at him. The woman comes back on, “Insider reports say that it’s the corpse of Daksh Galgotia. The reasons for his death have not been confirmed…”

Chapter Twelve

He opened the door to find the sophisticated, cane carrying, Brijesh Khanna, standing in front of him. Brijesh didn't have any fracture or impediment; he just fancied the cane, the top of which had a tiger like face made on it. Brijesh had a ponytail and wore round, brown tinted glasses. He didn't have the best of faces but he had a likeable, playful smile.

"Hello."

He stood in front of a six feet eight inches tall kurta clad man, tough and deadly looking. He always carried guards around, afraid of his life. Brijesh was a safe person. Even though he did a lot of business that could be frowned upon by the authorities, he made sure he did it elegantly and only seldom, brutally.

"I always liked your apartment." He studied the place. "Do you have it?" Brijesh asked.

The man walked over to the table, grabbing the package and handing it to him. "It's there."

He held it, looking at it back and fro as if examining it with his X-ray eyes, before he handed it over to his guard to carry.

"What do you need?" He asked.

"Weapons, as usual," he smiled, "much bigger ones."

"Did you like the deer antlers I gave you?"

Of course, I made a crown out of it.

He nodded.

"What did you do with it?"

"I keep it in my bedroom." the man narrowed his eyes. Why was Brijesh inquisitive about such a mundane thing that he had given a while ago?"

"Indeed." He tapped his cane, "I never really ask what you do, sir." He politely began, "or where you get my package from. I am ever grateful. You are my biggest supplier; hence I come in person and not sent my friends. I understood that in exchange of the package you wanted things, weapons and what not. I never understood the significance of deer antlers, which I had to bring from abroad, and specially export it for you, for being such a kind supplier to me."

"You are asking why I wanted it?"

“Of course,”

“I like it. It’s thorny and serrated but it’s pretty.”

“Hmph.” He nodded, “indeed, it is.” He brought up his hand to finally retreat and run back to his bungalow in Gurgaon where he held most of his business. “It was a pleasure meeting you again. I hope to seem you soon. Whatever you need, contact me.”

The man shook his powerful hands. Brijesh was a strong person and he could size up a person based on their grip and grasp. But he had a weakness. He only performed one business, and very energetically at that. He had his own clinic inside his bungalow, where his surgeons performed surgeries by removing the kidneys of people and selling it in the black market. Organ trafficking was popular in Gurgaon, especially the one done by Brijesh Khanna. In the low strata of society, Brijesh was notorious for drugging the victims if they didn’t allow for the organ to be removed, and then they were forced to have the surgery and left back on the street with the threat of death if they uttered anything about it. Haryana police never really found anything against Brijesh, mostly because half of the inspectors were his dear friends.

And as he left with his kurta-clad guard carrying the package, Brijesh had no idea he was carrying a pair of kidneys that belonged to Daksh Galgotia.

Chapter Thirteen

The next day, I get a call.

“Mr. Rajpoot?”

It is Mrs. Galgotia. The sharp, irritable voice is quite identifiable. Oh god, this is going to be a bad conversation.

“I have sent the money through Pritika. Thank you for your services.”

And that was it. She hangs up the phone as I wait, pressing it against my ears, and keep saying ‘hello’. That happened quickly, I sigh as I look at the blank screen of my phone. I failed to help her and her husband. I felt guilt more than disappointment. It hovered like an overcast shadow.

Mr. Tripathi was just a distraction created by us. He had no role. He was sitting the whole day in his house, with Mrs. Tripathi being his alibi. I watched the news, with the letter in my hand, trying to see where I went wrong. I had the chance. I had the name. I had the time. And I couldn’t save him.

But who was having such sadistic pleasure in making me feel so helpless?

Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell. What the hell did that mean? That was the only cryptic message in the entire letter.

I think, it’s time to talk to my friend, SHO Inspector Patel. A childhood buddy of mine, we grew up together in Chail where I had my hostel. Even though he was a station in-charge of Delhi, things fly around, lots of people get to know. I still remember a talk we had, where he told me how the society really works nowadays. When he had been newly promoted to his current position, he got the seat. People around his jurisdiction, those who wanted his help in something or the other, came to him and asked.

“I said to them, I will help them and guess what they did? They bribed me! Bah!” He laughed, with a drink in his hand. “Iravan, nowadays everyone thinks that bribe is the sure thing, like a guarantee. I said to that man, I don’t want the bribe. I will do it regardless of it. I mean, it wasn’t just a big deal, just a few checking up here and there, but he insisted on me to take the bribe as if I’m entitled to it in some way. People want to get rid of the bribing thing in this country, but when it comes to their getting favours, they always want to hop back. Remember that.”

I dial his number and wait for it to ring.

“Hello?” His ‘hello’ did seem kind of aloof and distant. He must be busy.

“Hey, you free?”

“Iravan, hi. I’m not actually. Is something wrong?”

“I would like to talk to you…”

He interjects.

“Why don’t we talk over dinner? I’ll bring my family. It’s been sometime also.”

“Sure,” I smile. I hate planning dinners, but I needed information from this guy. “Today?”

“Tomorrow,” he says and hangs up.

God, what’s with hanging up on people nowadays?

Chapter Fourteen

Zoravar Patel had a wife, who he had been trying really hard to have a baby with. He was a forty year old guy and didn't believe in medical tests, saying all of it is of no use; rather it'll happen when it's supposed to happen. Before we had dinner, Rutvi chatted with his wife while Sarang was busy fiddling with his phone and Tara was talking with her fiancé, who I had reluctantly agreed to call over after much insistence on her part. He stood small and almost reticent, with double chin. He was ugly and I couldn't help but notice why a beautiful daughter of mine fell for such a ordinary and ugly fellow.

But I didn't have time to mourn about this right now. I leave to go to my balcony, where the stars mingle in the smoggy sky, blinking with elegance. The night had a million whispers and I failed to hear every one of them as a tall, moustached man with patchy hair stood in front of me with a glass of scotch and a cigarette dangling from his fingers.

"You wanted to talk?" Zoravar asks.

I close the balcony doors to be inaudible to others. "I heard what happened to Daksh,"

"Nasty piece of shit," he frowns, "Why do you ask?"

"I was investigating his missing case."

"Yeah, well guess what? We found a lot of dirt on him. He was a pretty offensive guy and not just in his business. He was also luring kids to do things to them, a paedophile and an asshole."

"Are you on the case?"

"Most of us are, you know, the station officers were called together under the deputy to assist the Haryana police."

"I wonder who killed him."

He scoffs as he puffs his cigarette. "Whoever did it man, hated him. It was personal."

"Yah?"

"Yeah. He was gagged, bound, lashed by some whip. I mean, the CID found all sorts of scratches and scars over him. And by the level of intoxication said that his salt levels were less…"

"He was not fed…"

“And not given water,” he sighs, “he was basically tortured.”

“Who do you think can do this?”

He puffs again. “They say it’s the underworld. They are popular for torturing to extract money. We are investigating his records, finding links, you know. That’s the rational part.”

“What’s the irrational?”

“You heard of Psycho Yadav?”

“Yeah.” Raghu Yadav was a popular serial killer roaming around in the underbelly of Delhi, eating people’s organs after bludgeoning them to death.

“A cannibal, you see. We caught him five years back, it was a manhunt. He had escaped once due to lack of evidence but finally we did catch him. He was in Tihar, doing life. Turns out, there was a riot a few days back and he escaped. God damn, the Ministry of Home Affairs is going crazy over this.”

“How is it related to Daksh?”

“Psycho Yadav had a special liking for kidneys and Daksh Galgotia’s body was found without them.”

Chapter Fifteen

I sit at the office, flicking my tongue around the inner cheek, when Vardhaan asks me- “Why don’t you go to the police? I mean, this guy gave you a deadline and a name. He is playing with you. You can prevent him doing the same thing again by going to the police.”

“This mail was sent to my home,” I show him the envelope that I had been carrying around like a guilty burden in my pockets.

“That guy knows where I live and that means my family is in danger and that is the last thing I want, so I have to play along with him. Also, if I try to move them, I’ll be bombarded with questions. They will need explanations that I won’t be able to give and if I tell them…no…the less people know the better. I need to act normal in front of them and also proceed according to that lunatic.”

“Till when?”

“Let’s wait for his next letter.”

“You are kidding me.”

“I’m not.” I get to my feet as I show him the neat paper with the calligraphy writing on it. “This means something—find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell. He wants us to find it. And, perhaps, if I had found it, I would’ve been able to save Daksh Galgotia.”

“So you mean, ‘hell’ and ‘sin’ have a meaning?”

“Check it out, Google it. How many hells do we have?” I ask.

He taps buttons over the server. “There are too many mythologies consisting of different hells, especially Christianity. In *Dante’s Inferno* , it is said there were nine hells and in the end, there’s the devil. Every hell consisted of a certain punishment to a certain sinner.”

“Oh, that makes sense, check the hell where people are bound and starved.”

He clicks his mouse and zooms out paragraphs. There was even an essay with photographs on the side. “None like that.”

“Damn!” I smack the table, leading him to hold the laptop up in the air to save it from dropping down.

“Chill, bro,” Vardhaan says.

I can’t chill. I just let a man die. When a hundred die, whose deaths are not in

your control, you don’t feel a thing. But when you know who’s going to die and in how many hours, it costs your soul. It is the horror of helplessness and that is miserable.

“You think Psycho Yadav is behind this?”

“The papers said he was uneducated, couldn’t even speak Hindi properly and was a Jaat. I doubt he could speak to me, let alone write.”

“But we have an escaped convict on the run,”

“That’s not our problem.”

He just makes a trembling gesture before jutting his jaw as usual, “Delhi has just grown worse. I think I need to like pack my bags and move to Manali for a while. My friends are going there, so they are the added incentive.”

I shrug away whatever he says.

“Find whatever you can on hell and sins. I need whatever you can bring me, every mythology, and every culture. I need to know what this guy wants. We can only find him if we go along with him. If he tries to contact us again, we need to be ready for him.”

Chapter Sixteen

Swati Kaushik had got a call just an hour before the body was found. The call was simple. It had a strange, metallic voice like a rasping against a speaker. And the words still rung, echoing in the corridors of her memory.

“Hello, Mrs. Verma,” the voice had spoken.

“Who’s this?” No one knew anything about her being a ‘Mrs’ except for the family members and she had all the family numbers stored in her phone. This call came from a +17.

“My identity shouldn’t be of any importance. You must realize you have one hour to get an exclusive first look at a corpse, even before the authorities.”

“What?”

He was speaking fast. “You have one hour to find him. I have texted you his details. We will talk soon. Till then, have a fun time, will ya?”

And the phone hung up.

Corpse? Exclusive?

She got a message after the conversation that gave out the coordinates of a location, which was probably in Gurgaon. She had been struggling through her years trying to get the news. Her boss, Mr. Mahajan, had been harassing her to prove her worth for the job or leave the news channel. He found her incompetent, and incompetent she was. She had struggled all her formative school and college years, barely passing and her graduation in journalism was also a big sham where she was chosen on the basis of pure luck. She didn’t consider herself good but she knew there was a talent that she had failed to kindle. She had to give her boss a decent story for her to continue her duties as a reporter.

This was her chance. Was it a plot? *I don’t know.* But who in this world has succeeded without taking a few risks?

She and her friend and cameraman, Akram, had raced to get the information. Whoever it was, he was right. She was the first there. The footage she caught was handed over to the channel, where Mr. Mahajan, her boss, had clapped and she had smiled, concealing her clenched teeth.

Though all of this, did make her believe in one thing. Whoever chose her, knew her. It had been three years since she had lost her husband to cancer. *Three years.* The pain of losing him wasn’t much of a great ordeal as it had been a

reluctant arranged marriage. She had changed her marital status, dated a few jerks along the way and only her immediate family, the ones who came to the wedding, knew about it, otherwise it was just shit in the air, a passing monotony.

He knew. And perhaps, he understood where she was and how she was now. *Why did he help me* ?

But that was not important, what was important was...

Will he help me again?

Chapter Seventeen

Vardhaan hated doing little chores for Iravan Rajpoot, his so-called uncle. His mother always used to talk about him, and how much of an adventurous person he was. He led an expedition to a Bhoot Bungalow when he was ten years old with the other ten year olds. It did seem fascinating and these little stories had only led Vardhaan to take internship with him and he thought the pressure would be less on him also because he was a family member. Turned out, it wasn't. It sucked big time.

And especially this errand, the one where he had to meet Pritika.

Now, Pritika wasn't exactly a bad person. It was so long that he had forgotten how they had broken up. It was in school, perhaps. Yes, they were together in a school. She was his senior and they had dated for a while, before she started growing all cheesy and romantic. He wanted some freedom. He told her that. And that was when there was a fight which ensued for almost twelve days and twelve nights, and after she had cried enough to fill a bucket, he was finally safe from her.

Now, he saw her standing in the coffee shop, sitting in her long skirt, braided hair and cat shaped spectacles. She seemed like a perfect assistant, the mousy one, who listened to all the bullshit the boss has to offer and didn't utter a word. She was a submissive back then too, but more of a cry baby.

He entered the Starbucks in CP, a coffee place that's always crammed with people. She had somehow managed to get a seat and sat in a corner, facing the glass window. When she saw him, she climbed to her feet and said, "Hi"

"Hey," he said but remained standing. The errand was simple. He didn't have to wait around and discuss stuff. "Can I have the cheque?"

She handed him over the cheque from her little purse but as he began to move, she called in her squeaky voice. "But…but…excuse me?"

He went back. "What?"

"See, I know it's weird for you and it's weird for me."

"What do you mean?" He asked, making sure he didn't sound freaked out.

"I am over you and I'm only saying this because I don't want you to ignore me anymore. This is purely professional, so can we talk about my dead boss?"

She sure was being genuine, it was in her earnest eyes.

“What do you want to know?”

“What happened?” That was her question. “He’s missing one second and the next moment, the police find him dead?”

“They say it’s the mafia or a work of an escaped convict.”

She gasped to the point that she had to pull out her breathing pump. *She has asthma now?* “No. That is impossible! I know my boss. He would never do it.”

“He was a paedophile,” he said, just to prove he was right and give weight to the litany of accusations that were being thrown around in the name of her ex-employer. It was always an ego battle with girls.

“Where are you getting this information?”

“From the police.”

“Why haven’t they released this?”

“The victims or the children’s family don’t want their kids name out. And Mrs. Galgotia doesn’t want it either, so it has remained under wraps.”

“My god, he seemed so nice!” She exclaimed, squeezing one more pump of air inside, “Is there anything else? Listen, I know he was not the nicest man in the world, but I want to find the killer. Whoever did this, be it personal vendetta or a work of a maniac, I want to find out. And not just because of his death, but because someone else can get hurt.”

Vardhaan raised his brows. He remembered her to be really brilliant. She was always there, doing the hard work for the faculty, working her way to become a Head Girl. He could use her help because three hands working are better than two.

He began telling her what had happened and how it happened, the envelope and then the other matters, before she gasped and Vardhaan had to calm her down.

“You can’t tell this to anyone, especially my uncle. He’ll kill me first and then come for you.”

She paused, muttering to herself in mute speech.

“To know about hells and sins, we need to research a lot.”

“I know. I’ve been searching over internet but my laptop sucks.”

She pulled out her IPAD from the back and started scrolling around. “Starbucks has wi-fi, right?”

“Yep.”

She went over to the cashier to get the password of the wi-fi and then began working on it.

“So, basically, my poor boss was gagged and lashed. They didn’t reveal the details of his death.”

“They never do.”

She touched the pad, as she typed a few things over it. “It’s so strange.”

“What?”

“Strange as in hell is such an integral part of our lives and yet we never think about it. We don’t even know much of it.”

“That is strange.”

“Do you think…” she raised her head, questionably, “...do you think the killer wants us to know about hell?”

“Like gain knowledge?”

“Yeah, to make us remember the reality of afterlife.”

“You never know.” He nodded, though he found the theory too implausible. What his theory was, and the theory he had kept to himself, was that this man, whoever he was, killer or not, was doing it for fun. He liked it. He enjoyed people dancing as per his whims. He knew that slowly strings will attach themselves and people will form a team and work towards his riddles and like puppets they will all dance. He only understood this. It can’t be anything else.

“Hell is derived from the word *helle.* Every culture, a mythology has an overlord, like for instance the one who holds it tightly. In Greek mythology, the hell is known as Tartarus…” she zoomed the image larger, “and it’s controlled by Hades.”

“Yes. I’ve read *Percy Jackson.* ” Vardhaan grinned. “It was my favourite book while growing up. But I don’t think someone will be crazy enough to India to care about Greeks.”

“There’s Nergal in Mesopotamian mythology. In Norse, Hel is a being who presides over Hel. Osiris in Egyptian mythology. ”

“Tell me more about sins.”

“Sins are the bad deeds we perform, and every sin has a punishment.” She showed her IPAD which showed a picture of a man being buried alive in a B/W format. “This killer thinks he’s executing justice.”

“We know that.”

“He must have considered Daksh a sinner.”

“The killer is a vigilante?” He frowned, for he had never heard much about vigilantes in India other than the Gulabi Gang, who with pink sarees attack those who discriminate against women. “Aren’t vigilantes supposed to be good?”

“In comics, they are cool but in real life, they aren’t.” She shook her head as she finally showed a highly made-up monster with a wide head, green face, dark eyes and a long red tongue lolling around his lips. “Like every mythology, we also have one. He’s called Yama.”

“I know.”

“He has a lot of Yamduts, as well, who are his messengers.” She flipped open other pages. “His hell is known as *Narak* .”

“Of course, I remember that.” He rolled his eyes. His mother always used to say if he didn’t drink his milk; a *Yamdut* would come and snatch him away to the red lands. It was a fearful perception, for he used to dream about *Yamduts* . He had even searched of how *Yamduts* looked and it gave him a fright.

“What else do you know?” He asked.

She had paused, and he didn’t realize what had happened. She looked up, her body frozen, her eyes still, as her mouth opened but only air passed. She shook as she pulled up her IPAD to show a picture of a man being hung by ropes on all sides, across the wall, being starved and growing thirsty, while he’s being lashed by teal coloured demons.

Chapter Eighteen

Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell

Rohan Khan

24 hours

Another letter is here. I open it after Sarang passes it to me and boringly walks over to his room to talk to one of his friends. I find Rutvi making breakfast after a long time. I only get to have her hand made food sometimes and I choose Sunday, for that is the day when her episodes have the minimum chance of appearing.

Vardhaan had been given the work to meet Pritika. And when I had talked to him, it was then I got this mail. *Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell.* But that wasn't the most remarkable thing as the name of the victim was.

Who didn't know Rohan Khan?

He was the popular actor of Bollywood of the eighties and the nineties. He was not one of my favourite actors but I liked him nonetheless. He was a commercial actor and had been glamorised with a lot of celebrities back then. Worse than that, he was linked with Masood Iqbal, the don of Mumbai, having lunches and what not, during his rise to fame. Rohan, whose father was a brilliant writer, soon became a leading film star in the nineties but also had a lot of controversies, including two divorces. There was one where he got drunk and decided to bash up another drunk. Then, he was caught having illegal rifles at his house for which he was jailed for seven years and after coming out, he had been caught killing protected animals at a sanctuary. Though he didn't go to prison for that, he had to pay a heavy fine. But that didn't stop him. He continued shooting and killing animals. Now, he was a washed out actor and struggling to survive as he had spent all his money.

And I had to pay him a visit.

I had twenty fours.

I get to my feet as my daughter, Tara, enters from nowhere. "Dad, I need to talk."

Shit.

"What?"

"We seriously need to talk about my marriage, dad," she said as she stared at me

through her spectacles with her brows arched. She looked so much like her mother. “You approved of him but you aren’t taking this forward. When will you meet his parents? When will you decide the date?”

I had to do that too. I had promised her earlier but had forgotten. “We will. Right now, daddy has to go for some work.”

“It’s Sunday. Even I’m at home,” she gritted her teeth.

She didn’t understand that I had to go and save a damn life and that I couldn’t tell her that.

“If you are not staying at home, daddy, I’m leaving too. I had to meet Kabir but I sacrificed it since you weren’t going out anywhere too.”

Sarang comes out of his room with his phone in hand while Meena with her glimmering buck teeth stands in the corner and Rutvi looks from the kitchen.

I couldn’t lose my cool. Not today. “Hey, okay, Tara baby, I promise I’ll return home early and we will go today and have a chat with his parents, okay?”

She looks up and nods before she goes into her room and slams the door behind her.

Chapter Nineteen

I sit in my car as I start the engine and set the car rolling. I call up Gagan. I always do when I need to know about someone and right now, only I knew that Rohan Khan was sitting calmly in his Delhi house.

“Hello?”

“Iravan!”

“Are you free? I need your help.”

“You really screwed up the Galgotia case, Iravan,” his voice is stern. He’s not like this usually. “That was not cool. That was a big case and I gave it to you. I gave a high profile missing case to you and you messed it up.” *And if you’ll not shut your mouth up, I won’t be able to protect a life, you dumb shit.*

“Can I now ask you something?”

A pause ensues.

“What?”

“I need to know everything about Rohan Khan and I want to know about his whereabouts and his location.”

“Why?”

“A private client wants me to check on him,”

“Private? Since when have you been handling private clients? We do public work and I’m the medium from where most your jobs come. You don’t do private.”

“He’s a good case, high profile, might really help for the business,” I add instantly, lying like a pig.

“Ergh,” he sighs, “I’ll call you when I get something. I have to look through stuff right now. I will call when I will get it.”

“Get it right now!” I yell.

“Calm down, bro. It takes a little bit of time. An investigator of mine is looking into things. He’s going to send you the file on your mail. Check it out now.”

“Does that have an address?”

“It has the man’s favourite colour too,” he responds.

I open up my Gmail and download the attachment sent with the mail.

“Where did you get his information?”

“Here and there, social security check and all. Delhi Police wanted some help from me, so I pulled up this after investigating and asking around.”

“Why would Delhi Police want to know about him?”

“He isn’t the most liked celebrity in Bollywood.”

I look over at his address. “Is he still there living in his South Delhi bungalow?”

“The last I checked, he had been living there for quite some time. He makes foreign trips when needed, otherwise he stays at home and calls up escorts now and then.”

“Thanks.”

I hang up the phone before he says anything else. I race through the roads, cutting through the traffic. Sooner or later, I was sure to get a ticket for driving like a maniac. I reach South Delhi before I call up Vardhaan for an update and as I fumble with the phone with one hand over the wheel, I drop it down.

Shit.

I don’t pick it up till I reach the humongous gates of a bungalow in Vasant Kunj with widespread lawns, fountains and a white facade. I wonder where Rohan Khan gets all of his money from when he’s not even acting or producing anything anymore. Is it the underworld? Is he still in contact with them?

The guard stops me and asks me questions to which I say I am a private investigator.

“*Saab busy hai* ,”

“Tell him it’s important.”

The guard sighs and moves to his cabin to call inside and notify my arrival before he opens the gate and lets me in. I am surprised Rohan Khan allowed me on just my name but perhaps the private investigator tag helped. There are very few private investigators in India and they are usually associated with bad news. In a way, that was true as I also had bad news.

I reached the door and a man servant allows me into the house. I find myself in a marble floored hall with a high ceiling, great lighting and an amazing decor. He makes me sit down on a couch in front of a tiger skin that is spread on the floor. I take out my phone and dial Vardhaan’s number but it’s continuously busy.

“Mr. Rajpoot?”

I instantly get to my feet and greet ‘the’ Rohan Khan. He didn’t have any guards around him as he used to. He’s in khaki shorts and a loose shirt and keeps running his fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

“I hear you are an investigator. May I know what has happened?”

For a person surrounded by so many controversies, he sure did have sophistication.

Should I tell him or not? If I do, will my family be safe? I didn’t know. And I won’t ever know. The thought slowly started to form a puzzle in my head and I suddenly started regretting this meeting. I didn’t even have any proof other than a piece of paper where his name and an hour was written. What if it was a prank? What if that earlier death was just a mere coincidence?

But why the hell am I thinking of this when he’s waiting for my answer?

“I just wanted to ask you if you would like to utilise the services of Panthers. It’s an investigative and security firm…”

He arches his brow and I know I’m going to get blown. But I also know that if I warn him, things might turn uglier.

“You just came here to sell your firm?”

“That’s what we do.”

He flares his nostrils but his voice remains calm. I notice how handsome he was in his days as the traces of his good looks were still evident on his face. “You mind if I leave to meet my psychiatrist? I’m getting late. I am thankful for your services but I don’t need them. I already have security. Thank you very much.”

I smile and then leave. Do I regret coming all the way? I don’t know. But I can’t base someone’s death over a piece of paper. I can’t do that, even though the self proclaimed prophetic killer has been right once.

The question that probes me now is—do I want him to be right twice?

Chapter Twenty

Rohan Khan ran. He ran as far and as fast as he could. He didn't know where he was, other than the forested misty woods that had led him into a hole of nothingness. It was oblivion. He didn't know who he was running from except from a figure—a man painted in black with deer antlers stuck to his skull like helmet.

With all the blood pumping in his ears and brain, he couldn't really process of how it all began. He had returned from a dinner, slept for a while and at around ten o clock, left for jogging. And that was when he got hit on the head. Next thing was the figure with horns splashing water over him. He had looked up, with his hands cranked and said, "Please leave me, please."

The figure said nothing. The skin glimmered with his fiery red eyes, glowing like rubies. He gestured him to run in the jungle. And when he begged and cried, he was pushed away with the threat of a rifle. He noticed that rifle. He knew the rifle.

It was his.

He used to hunt around with it, killing bunnies, peacocks, elephants. He did all of it in Africa. He had been doing it for quite some time for his father, who was a Nawab and a generic poet, who also had *khandani paisa*, and almost all of his ancestors had a penchant for hunting animals and eating them. He had grown up seeing animals being killed for fun and his first kill was a tiger. He had to just sit in his jeep and shoot it. It hit the head. Later, he made a carpet of it. He never could really forget the miserable face of the animal and how powerful he felt that time. It was the struggle, the determination. He had realized that the fittest survive and he believed it but he had to do it in secret because of the NGO and Government restrictions on hunting.

He swallowed a lump, closed his eyes and started to run. And he had been running ever since. Now, as he looked behind him and saw that no one was chasing him, he stopped to catch his breath. He scanned the surrounding and realized that he was standing over thorny shrubs and that there were tall trees with thick canopies that shadowed the entire area.

He was in Sanjayvan. He had seen the place but before he could look around to see where he could exit from, the sound of gunshot rang in the air. His nerves froze at the sound and, in fear, he started running again. For a man in his fifties, he was a pretty fit guy. He made sure he was. But today was excruciating and if

he survived such a horrendous game, he would make sure this black skinned moron would taste a good amount of lead from his other rifle, the one he had not stolen.

But as he turned his head, he saw that the black figure, with the horned devil head, was upon him and pointing the rifle at his head.

There was a loud crackling sound and the next thing he knew was the slow, numbing pain seizing his diaphragm. He looked down to find a deep gash in his chest from which dark crimson blood was beginning to ooze.

Chapter Twenty One

The devilish figure laughed as Rohan Khan collapsed on the ground and struggled. He walked over to kick him on the non wounded side and probe him with the butt of the rifle. When Rohan didn't move, he clicked his gun near his head.

"What…what…" Rohan was muttering incoherently. "Why a-are you d-doing this to me?"

"Run."

"W-what?"

"RUN!" The devil yelled.

And when Rohan didn't and he was about to faint, the man grabbed his t-shirt, tore it from his shoulders and wrapped it around his wound for the blood flow to cease. He forced him to get up and begin to run again. With Rohan's one hand over his wound close to his ribs, he started limping and running but his pace was slow.

The man with the skull helmet walked slowly, passing through the trees, before taking aim at Rohan Khan. He liked Sanjayvan. It was quiet, eerie and so huge and dense.

And then, he shot. Missed. He shot again. He missed again but the last bullet found its mark. It went right through Rohan Khan's head, spraying blood around as he fell on the ground and let the earth take away all of his sins and swallow them.

Chapter Twenty Two

I woke up to find Rutvi staring blankly at the wall.

It's Monday and, usually, I would be greeted by a kiss on the cheek. It was a tell tale sign that she was fine. It was either a kiss or the television in the room being switched on and a soap opera being played while she would dig in some banana chips. But if none of it is there, you know it means trouble.

I lean against the wall, with half of my body still aligned over at the bed, as I call her but she doesn't listen. She's blank. She's deaf, for now. It's the usual. I have never known where she goes and who she meets in that semi- consciousness where she can't even hear her own husband's voice clearly. I touch her forehead and massage it when she pulls away my hand robotically, leans over the bed and wraps herself with a blanket.

I sigh as I go to get the medicine bag that I've kept it in the drawer. I pull it out, searching for a sleeping pill, Lonazep. When I find it, I hand it to her with a glass of water. She doesn't take it so I yell at her and force the tablets down her throat, checking her mouth to make sure she didn't hide it below her tongue.

Then, I take a bath and as I am in the process of getting dressed, I hear the door bell ring. Instantly, I run to the door and as I open it, I find Vardhaan staring at me with wide eyes.

"What's wrong with your phone?" He yells as he comes inside. "I've been trying to call you since yesterday."

"Same here. Network sucked. What happened?"

"I got to talk with Pritika properly."

"And?"

"She found something on hell and the sin that you won't like."

I instantly recall Rohan Khan and yesterday's mail. It's been twenty four hours. But I choose to tell him about it after he shows me whatever he wants to. Also, I wasn't sure if this was a coincidence or a prank or something. My gut feeling told me that I was being played.

Vardhaan opens his laptop in front of me and clicks on a page that shows a photograph of a man tied with a rope, starved and lashed by a whip. And the entity, who is whipping him, is dark skinned with horns coming out of his skull.

"That creature. That's Yama," he says. "And that, uncle, is Daksh Galgotia.

That’s what your friend said, right? That Daksh was hung in some place and was beaten to death with whips.”

“But what are you trying to say?”

“Whoever this guy is, he imagines himself to be Yama, the god of death and justice. We were right about that part, though it wasn’t Mr. Tripathi. And this guy is carrying out justice. You see, in Hindu mythology, every sinner had its own hell. For instance, a rapist or a murderer of a Brahmin family had different hells and each hell had a specific punishment for the sinner.”

“How many hells are there?”

“In *Agni Purana*, it mentions four hells. In *Manusmriti,* it’s twenty one hells. And in *Bhagvat Gita,* it has twenty eight hells. So, when this guy Yama sends you *Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell* that means he wants you to find the hell and to find the hell you have to find the sin.” He opens another document where there’s a word of a hell and in front of it, there’s a description.

“These are all the hells I was able to collect in one place, from all the scriptures, with the help of Pritika. We had to go to British Council for this as the internet didn’t have all the information. In each hell there is a sin being washed and you have to find that hell, but to find that hell, you need to know the sinner’s sin. Are you understanding?”

“I’m getting something.”

“Like for instance, Daksh Galgotia belonged to *Tamisra* . It’s a hell for those who grab another’s wealth, wife and children. If you see, Daksh Galgotia was a sneaky person, stealing money in a legal sort of way. And he was a pedophile. That explains why Yama killed him. He belonged to the *Tamisra* .”

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

I instantly remember the letter and my instincts begin to shatter in front of me. I was wrong. I was damn stupid. And it made me feel guiltier, as I look at the Tamil news channel where I see a news reporter talking something about Rohan. The language isn’t clear and I can catch only few words.

“*Rohan Khan…found…dead…at Sanjayvan. ”*

Chapter Twenty Three

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know you’ll find about this.” I say in my defence. I was wrong and I was defending myself. “If it wasn’t for Pritika, you would be dozing.”

It didn’t affect him as I thought it would. Rather, he just flares his nostrils, looks down and says, “You met the man and you had the power to save him, but you didn’t.”

“I had second thoughts…I thought it wasn’t true. I thought Galgotia’s murder was a coincidence.”

“Well, you were wrong, clearly. If the damn network would have worked, we won’t have a dead body on our hands. Now, we have blood on our hands. Pritika, you and I have blood on our hands. And this guy is having a blast about it. It’s a sport, don’t you see? He’s playing a sport and we are his game, where he’s tossing us around. He’s having fun, having the upper hand. He wants us to feel like shit for not preventing two people from being murdered and he knows we can’t go to the police as the safety of our familes is at stake.”

I sigh. He was right. I would never admit it, but Vardhaan was a brilliant slob. He sure was lazy but when his nerves begin working, he’ll be the finest person to perform a job.

“What should we do now?” I add.

“Find his hell.” He opens the document on his laptop screen. “You went to Rohan Khan’s house, right? What did you find on him? Anything that might match his hell and his sin, even tell about his background if it comes to that,”

“He was... um... he was connected with mafia and had a lot of affairs.”

He looks over at the screen and shakes his head. “None. Anything more?”

“Oh, yeah, he was into hunting animals. He used to go abroad to kill some when the Government of India screwed him up.”

“Hunting animals?” He narrows his eyes as he looks over at the list. I wait and my impatience begins to take over, when he says finally, “Here it is.”

He shows me.

PRANARODHA—Wanton killing of animals. Yama play archery sport with this sinner.

“My god.” My hand covers my mouth as I stare at it in disbelief. I led a washed out but once famous actor to die so miserably even though I was so close to him, inches away and I could have said something to him.

“You need to talk to Inspector Patel, your SHO friend. He must know how he died for they are not revealing the details over the news. And if he died the same way it is mentioned here, we have a psychopath on our hands that we cannot do anything about.”

Chapter Twenty Four

I let the bell ring. My heartbeat begins to take slow, tumultuous stops when finally he picks up and says in his hoarse voice.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, Iravan.”

“Yes, you are in my contact list.” He is worried and his voice is tensed and tight. The police must be really growing crazy with two bodies within five days. “What happened?”

“I heard what happened to Rohan Khan.”

“Don’t tell me you were investigating him too because then I’ll have to bring you in for interrogation for being associated with them.”

I chuckle, but he’s in no mood to laugh. “Where are you?”

“Thana,”

“What happened to him?”

“Why do you want to know? It’s unprofessional of me telling someone, who is my friend,”

“Rohan Khan was my favourite actor,” I lie. I didn’t even watch half of his movies. But I did know who he was and that he had been really popular in his day. “I really want to give some sort of a closure to myself.”

He sighs, grunts and finally speaks. “He was found at Sanjayvan. It’s all over the news, which is quite normal. He was wearing shoes but by the look of it, he had run quite a lot. Also, he was shot with his own rifle, so we are guessing he was running through the woods, escaping from the gunman when he was shot twice. We think it’s a passion crime. Also the animal rights activists are going crazy as they have found that he had been keeping rhino skins and skins of other animals in the basement of his house. He could’ve been jailed for almost ten years with no probation.”

I say thank you and keep the phone down. I had kept it on the speaker phone, for Vardhaan to listen to it with me and as we look at each other, we realize it’s time to find the god of death.

Chapter Twenty Five

This god of death isn't the only one who has brought problems in my life. I have more issues to worry about such as my sick wife, a nagging daughter and a bully son. But I choose to not dwell over it, for now.

We research more on Narak and Yama; we print the details out and make a collage of various hells and its descriptions and nail it on the wall of the office, making it more accessible. Then, we do what we should have done before- we study the envelopes and the letter, examining it carefully for any traces of its origins.

"He wants us to find the hell. He must have given something -a number or an address where I can contact and tell him."

"You are right about that."

We study both of them and realize there's nothing on it.

"Does he even want us to give him the answers?"

I raise my brows. I wasn't much of a scientist but I wanted to try something. I switch off all the lights in the room, making it completely dark. I even switch of all the computers or electronic devices that might emit light. Then, I pull out my phone and switch on the torch in it.

"What are you doing?"

"This was something me and my boys used to do in the old days," I reply.

I use the light all over the page to find something and then I flip it on the other side where there is a trace of a cell number written over it, in faint gray colour. I narrow my eyes as Vardhaan exclaims in shock.

"How did you know that?"

"It's science. The killer made invisible ink with the help of lemon and water. You can make your message invisible by just writing it with the cotton bud that was dipped in the mixture of water and lemon. Lemon is an organic substance that oxidizes and turns brown when heated but when it is dipped in water, it changes its rhythm."

"Why would he want to hide his contact?"

"He's testing our intelligence."

I know what I have to do. I order Vardhaan to switch on the lights, while I dial

the number. And while I do that, I tell him to check the number on Truecaller.

“It’s blocked.”

“Can you get blocked numbers even in India?”

“You can buy it from the market. It comes for half a lakh or something.”

“Damn.” I look at the number for a while. And there’s an instinct that tells me I should contact the police now. They’ll have high tech gadgets. They could trace the call easily and catch him. But then, he had to do it himself. It was personal.

I press the green button and there’s a ring or two before a voice says:

“Hello?”

Chapter Twenty Six

“Who are you?” I demand to know.

There’s a pause and heavy breathing before loud laughter ensues. The laugh is raspy and powerful. It feels like the man was straining his voice, hurting his throat by making it more hoarse and metallic. He wanted to frighten me.

“You finally found the riddle, didn’t you?”

“Who are you?”

I see Vardhaan staring at me. I have never seen him this tensed. Oh hell, worse, I have never seen myself so tensed. I have clenched my fingers into tight fists while I’m silently gritting my teeth.

“You don’t have to know me. In fact, you already know me. The entire world knows me.”

“Yama,” I breathe.

“Oh, you guessed that too! Brilliant. I’m kind of disappointed though, for you let two people take the fall till you understood the meaning of what I did and who I am. I hope you don’t let the third one go.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Ask me the right question.”

I narrow my eyes, dramatically turning in the room and stamping my feet to avoid Vardhaan’s gaze. “What right question?”

“That’s not the right question. Ask me the *right* question.”

I wait, as I think about it. “Who are you going to kill next?”

“Always in the hope of breaking the suspense now,” he laughs. “You’ll get my mail soon. And, mind you, this will be a tougher one.”

“You can’t just go on killing people. You are a maniac.”

He didn’t seem offended. He knew I was trying to enrage him. He was smart and that is worse for me. “Wasn’t it fun when your little nephew and you tried to contact each other yesterday, but none could?”

Oh no.

“Wasn’t it fun?”

“It was *you* .” I spat. “How did you do it? Are you a hacker?”

“Or I can be one, who knows a hacker. Who knows? Isn’t it fun with all the cloud of mystery being formed in your head? Aren’t you enjoying this attention?”

“Why me?”

“Ah! And that is the right question!” He laughs. “You finally found the right question. Why you out of million people? Why just you? Hmph. I don’t know and I hope I should. Maybe, I like you. Maybe, I like your daughter, Tara. Such a sweet girl. I see her every day meeting Kabir, the handsome. Quite a fancy man! I also like how your wife Rutvi is such an ill person. How is she? I heard she’s not fine. You know, you did a fine work in one thing. You weren’t stupid about showing this to the police otherwise you would have been considered a fool and you would have been jailed for having names of people who are dead.”

I didn’t think that way. I had been thinking about protecting my family, but I had forgotten about the technicalities of our judicial system.

“Now that we have been cleared up, I hope you take good care of your son too. I hear he has been into some rather fascinating trouble. You’ll be getting my gift soon,” he says and hangs up.

I decide to call him again but, perhaps, he had put me in the block list as now the number was showing as being unreachable. I throw away the phone as Vardhaan grabs my arm and calms me down.

“He knows about my entire family and he knows what they do and how they are. If I choose not to play along with him, he can destroy them and not just them, but me along with them.” Vardhaan gasps in horror.

“He’s tangled you in his web,”

“He is talking about my son and that something is wrong with him.”

I instantly begin to look for his number in the contacts when I get a call from a landline number. Instinctively, I feel it’s bad news for me. I pick it up.

“Who is this?” A lady asks.

“I’m... uh, I’m Iravan Rajpoot.”

“Father of Sarang Rajpoot?”

“Yes,” I sigh, “what is the matter, ma’am?”

“The principal of the college wants to meet you today at two o clock regarding the behaviour of your son.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

I drive to the college, leaving Vardhaan to handle the paperwork at the office. What has Sarang done; I worry as I park my car in the college parking. I have no clue whatsoever but I know that if he gets suspended, he will be in a big problem.

The question is how did the killer know that Sarang was in trouble? Did he follow him? Was he from his college? Was he his best friend? But then, it doesn't explain the reason why he was after me.

And as I walk through the stony corridors, I find myself followed by three figures—one in the jacket, one in khaki pants and another one in a suit. They all have scars.

I wait outside the room, looking at all the students staring at my tall frame. The peon opens the door and as I enter, the first thing I notice is that the heavily air conditioned room is filled with relics and portraits. The room is well furnished with many awards on shelves of the room. Calmly oblivious about my presence is Principal Prithvi, who is busy talking to another person. After the guy leaves, he looks at me. There's a mundane silence before he caps his pen.

"Sit down," he says, and his accent is immaculate. "You are Sarang's father?'

"Yeah." I nod as I take the chair. "What's the problem, sir?"

I notice his French beard, white in colour, his half bald head and his grey eyes hidden behind his rimless spectacles.

"Your son was found humiliating a kid in the class. The classroom was empty and that student was studying. Apparently, your son had fun teasing and taunting this boy, and would have become violent, had it not been for the intervention of one of our teachers. The boy is emotionally scarred. I find it very hard to believe that someone belonging to such a prestigious institution as this would have any excuse for exhibiting such behaviour."

He doesn't sound angry but his words are fluent and strong. "Now, I ask you, what should we do about Sarang?"

"I am sorry, sir. I promise I will teach him better manners. He'll say sorry to the boy he troubled. I promise you that."

"He already said sorry after a lot of persuasion from the faculty. He wrote a letter too." There's a thin, sinister smile playing along his lips. "But still, I'm going to rusticate him."

“On what grounds?”

He sure had bullied the boy but he hadn’t been violent. He had also adhered to the rules and apologized to the boy. He could be suspended for few days, but rustication would mean taking it to a whole new level.

“He didn’t…”

“DU has made people sign affidavits that they will not rag, and yet ragging occurs. A boy was found bleeding and drunk because his seniors thought it would be fun to baptize him with alcohol. Such malice cannot be tolerated anymore,” The principal said sternly.

“Do you want to make an example of Sarang? Don’t make him a scapegoat, sir.” My voice ranges from worry to anticipation. “He’s a nice kid, he has a bright future.”

“He must have one. But not here.”

“What do you want?” I grit my teeth. I had to succumb to his level. “There must be something you want. What is it?”

He leans back on his revolving chair. “You mistake me for our government, Mr. Rajpoot.”

“There is a sexual harassment case going on,” I instantly remember the incident that’s been flying around for a few weeks where he had been charged by a student of his, from a special English class he took for a blind girl, that he had been touching her in places. She reported in time before he got closer or could harm her, but the issue had ruined his reputation. “I can get it rid for you.”

“And if I may ask, in total confidence, how do you intend to do it?”

“I find my ways.”

He purses his lips thoughtfully. “Today is the twelfth. I will rusticate Sarang Rajpoot on the fourteenth, which gives you one day. Till then, my decision remains firm.”

That man just gave me a deadline to save my son’s education.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Swati Kaushik had just lit up a cigarette after having returned from a boring day at work. It was late. She had lit up few incense candles in her living room, poured herself scotch, got into her shorts, jumped on her sofa and held a book up, with a loose burnt cigarette dangling as she pulled it out from her thick lips, puffed it and felt herself relax.

She could see her reflection in the window glass and could see her shoulder length cropped hair, eyes masked with mascara, her lips naturally pink and full. She always thought of herself as pretty but she never really realized prettiness could cost in this country. She had been going through a lot of shit since the beginning and if it wasn't for her guts and grit, she would've succumbed long ago to helplessness. And fate had tossed her into the hands of her boss who controlled her. *Not for long. Not for damn long.*

She recalled the call she got yesterday morning.

"Hello, Mrs. Verma."

"You need to stop calling me that, whoever it is. I don't know how you know this but I am Swati Kaushik now."

"You were once." He snarled. "But I'm not here to discuss your legal names. You must have understood why I'm calling you?"

"There's another murder, isn't it?"

"A body no one knows about and to be truthful, no one will."

"Who are you?" She had looked sideways to make sure that her voice did not carry outside her small cubicle. "Who the hell are you? Are you murdering them? I saw what happened to Daksh Galgotia even with all the police around. I saw what you did to him."

"And what makes you think I did anything to them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps I was just an audience and the real killer is someone else."

"Is this a joke?"

"This is your life. I give you this because I fancy you. You are in trouble, Mrs. Verma. You have a job that is slipping away from you. Your boss is oblivious to your hard work and passion. He considers you dispensable. Rather, you are indispensable but he just makes you think you aren't, so that he could get a little

action from you. Oh, I know what you do to hold on to your job, Mrs. Verma. Aren't you a naughty girl?"

She felt miserable at the moment. No one knew about it. And yet this maniac did.

"Women are sexually harassed every day at offices and I don't blame you for giving in. After all, the fittest survive, don't they? But you don't have to anymore. I'm giving you a chance. I can help you be in the exclusive league. Imagine that you are the only person, first at the crime scene, reporting a corpse. Imagine how many news channels will die to have you on their side and then you can leave *News Aaj* by kicking your boss's nuts really hard."

The idea had seemed entertaining and she had grinned like a fool.

"What is it now then?" She asked.

"Inside the Sanjavan forest and bring an officer with you. You don't want to raise suspicion by finding it yourself now, do you? Tell them you got it from a jogger who studies in JNU and he has a little sprint inside the forest every day." There was a malignant tone of horror in his tone. "I hope I get to see you on television now. Be lovely and wear something black, will you?" And he had hung up the phone.

And that is what she did. She didn't wear anything dark, though. That would be just outright obeying someone crazy. She went there, shot it, got an exclusive tape for her news channel and got congratulated again. She was called by an inspector, asked questions about how she found it and she told the same thing the man had told her to say. The inspector bought it with ease.

And here she was, sipping scotch, smoking cigarettes and reading a book upside down until she realized it was the wrong way and held it upright. She was lost in many thoughts, especially the ones about her husband, Surohit. He was a nice man. She still recalled how he didn't touch her on her *suhaag raat.* They had never met before that. It was an arranged marriage and she hadn't even completed her graduation when she was forced to marry some stranger. She agreed and found that the man was sweet. He was older than her, probably by ten years or more, and he understood her alienation in the new life. He let her complete her studies and to do her diploma in journalism. He had only touched her when she allowed it.

Surohit was a nice man. And she lost him in the worst of circumstances. She still missed him even if she did not weep for him. There was a picture of him in a frame in her living room which she would stare at with tender feelings and

realise that he was the most open minded person she knew.

And then the door banged hard.

She got to her feet and opened the door to find a ghost from her past—a man she had never realized would come up to her doorstep at this time of the evening.

“Hi,” Iravan Rajpoot said with a weak smile.

Chapter Twenty Nine

“What do you want?”

I don’t even enter and that’s the first thing she asks me. I look like a wreck, sure. I had been going through stuff she wouldn’t understand and she would have been the last person I would’ve met. But I needed her help. She had contacts and media information that can help me find a thing or two on Principal Uday Prithvi. I needed to save his ass to save my son’s ass. I still recall how my conversation with my son was, in the car as I was driving back to Rajouri Garden.

“Why did you do this?” I asked him. I make sure I don’t go batshit crazy on my kid. That’s not the right way.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Sir said you did.”

“He’s a jerk.”

True that.

“But that boy wasn’t.”

He folded his arms and looked outside the window as he slouched back in his seat. I noticed how uncanny our resemblance was except for his bushy hair and shaved face. Our eyes had the same brown and his nose was long and aquiline like mine, and we had definite jaws.

“Why did you do it? Why did you trouble him?”

“Just like that,” he said it without even looking at me.

I recall how we never talk now because most of the times he’s busy with his phones while I’m busy with my job. We never have the Sarang Days out anymore like we used to, when I would to take him to places every weekend when he was small. I would buy him an action figure, let him eat a happy meal at McDonalds and roam around, holding hands with him. Now, there was this void between us I wasn’t able to breach or comprehend. As a young boy, I could never have imagined to see him grow into a bully like he was today.

“You need to share, you know? What prompted you to hit him? Was he a loser in a class or some random geek you like to trouble? What was it?”

His fingers went through his hair. “I…uh…he got to know.”

“Know what?”

“He got to know and he was having fun about it, saying he’ll gossip,” Sarang kept saying without even realizing I was there. “I got angry, lost control and I was about to punch him when the teacher came.”

“What did he know?”

“You need to promise you won’t freak out.”

“Have I ever?”

“You are a conservative father.”

“But I am more broadminded now, so tell me.”

“Well,” he sighed and he matched his eyes with mine. “My romantic interests are inclined towards boys.”

Chapter Thirty

As I make my way into her home, she doesn't even offer me water until I ask her. I recall the conversation with my son. He told me the reason he bullied around was because he thought his strange homosexual feelings were due to his lack of masculinity, so to feel more macho, he performed arduous tasks and acted like a bully. But then, he realized that this thing was not a disease but more of a choice and he just had to be happy with it and he wanted me to be happy about it as well.

How can I be happy with my son being a fag?

We used to make fun of the slightly pansy kind of guys when we were in the army. No one accepted being gay but those who were suspected were harassed and made fun of.

And here I was, stuck in the biggest irony of my life. My own son is of that breed that I used to condemn. I didn't respond at that time but I talked to Rutvi, who was in her normal condition and she said she already knew, which was an even bigger surprise for me. I didn't talk to my son. I wasn't able to visualize him with other boys, holding hands, and doing strange acts. It was beyond my imagination. Am I a homophobe? Sure, I could be. I don't support it but here I was stuck and confused about what to do, so I had let it go for now as I already had a killer looming over my head.

I take a sip of water and then gulp it down as I look at Swati. Whenever I look at her, I'm not proud. We had a strange thing. My wife was in the hospital after her second suicide attempt. And Swati was married. We both had a case. She wanted dirt on a politician and me too. And we worked together. One thing led to another, and we did things we both regretted after that. Though we never pursued what we had, I still dream about her.

And here I was, after three years. It had been long, of course. The last time I had talked to her was when I offered my condolences after her husband's death.

"What do you want?" She asks again.

"I'm afraid I need your help."

"I thought you liked investigating alone."

"I need to know about someone."

"And who might that be?"

"Uday Prithvi, I need to know all about the sexual harassment case and what all

you have.”

“Why would I want to give you that?”

I tell her how my son was in trouble but I don’t tell her about his sexuality. I just tell her I seek some information about the case so I can help my son from Prithvi’s wrath.

She nods and goes back in her room to bring a box of files and papers. “He’s an asshole, thinking he can get away from this case. Media has a lot of shit on him. This case can lead to his resignation and prison without bail.”

“What had happened exactly?”

She shows me the copy of the FIR of the disabled girl, Smriti Tanuja. “Apparently, the principal used to take special classes with other disabled children in college. It was advanced English that he personally taught. There were tutorials that he used to take in his house and that is where he harassed her by touching her in certain places and then apologizing but he just kept getting closer every day.”

“What happened then?”

“She filed an FIR, got herself a lawyer free of cost with the backing of a NGO and that lawyer is the reason as to why Principal Uday Prithvi is on thin ice. The lawyer, Harun Makhija, was the one who found more scandals like this on Uday and he will present all of that to the court. Apparently, and it is to my knowledge only, but Harun has a truck load of files that can make Prithvi to go to jail for a long time. He had molested a few other disabled girls as well, by promising scholarships in return. The only defence he had is that the girls are trying to do this because they want high marks from him and that he’s the victim here. The court is not yet taking any decision because of the respect he commands as a principal and a top scholar of this country and are having a hard time believing that he could do such a thing. ”

“Harun…” I pick up a file where his face is shown. It’s a news article and I see how neatly parted hair he had, “he wants to destroy Uday.”

“Yep, he hates him.”

“So, if he doesn’t show up that evidence in court, Uday will be safe?”

“For now.”

“I hope he does.” I keep away the file. “My son will be safe from rustication then.”

“Yeah.” She closes all the files and leans back as she puffs her cigarette, “You came here to search for a closure?”

“You can say so.”

“The question is which closure?”

I look at her at that moment and I know what she means. We had an abrupt breakup and, perhaps, she still carried a certain hatred for me. After all, we had a good chemistry.

“When is the next court hearing?” I ask, ignoring the question.

“Friday, day after tomorrow.”

That is why he is rusticating Sarang tomorrow. His rustication order will be valid for it was done during the tenure of him being a principal. I cannot let him do it. Not now. He’s damn smart. This leads me to only one alternate option.

It’s time to meet Harun Makhija.

Chapter Thirty One

It doesn't take me time to reach his three storeyed South Ex house. I didn't get much of information about Harun Makhija from Vardhaan, who had hacked into social security codes, ID proofing in the database to find Harun's face, his address, and his phone number.

By talking to a few more contacts, I was able to find out that Harun was a forty year old bachelor, a womanizer and a man who believed in technology. The files that Swati talked about must be in his hard drive. Thinking that he must be out, I wrap a cloth around my mouth, wear a cap and sunglasses and move towards his second floor apartment in the house. I pull out a pin and knick the front door lock until it opens. I move inside, scanning the room in the light of a yellow light bulb that is switched on inside.

He has two more rooms and a study, excluding the store which was locked. Instead of going into his bedroom, I move to his study and check the files and folders with my gloved hands. I open the files but I find nothing unusual.

Where could he be?

I see Vardhaan calling me up.

I see his name flash on my phone and I realize that I haven't told him where I was or why I needed Harun's information. I had told him that I needed it for some personal reasons. He hadn't questioned much but I guess he must be thinking about all the secrecy.

I disconnect the call when I hear something. It's a sound. I open the bedroom door a little to see Harun entering the living room, as I had suspected. I realize I have nowhere to go. There were no windows in the room, nor was there any place to hide as even the cupboards were filled with clothes.

And then I see him laughing and moving towards the bedroom, holding the girl's hand.

Chapter Thirty Two

I hide under the bed, feeling like a kid all over again and remember the times I used to do this to escape from my father and mother’s frequent quarrels.

There’s very little space down here and I am feeling cramped as I hear them sit on the bed, talk awkwardly, and discuss money. I tap my fingers silently as I don’t know what I should do.

I hear Harun get up and stand as the girl comes over to him, touches his chest and his arms, moan, and then kneel down. And as she does that, I think she sees me from the corner of her eyes and she freezes. There’s a brief smile and then she nods. She stands up and whispers something to Harun.

He walks over to the other side, perhaps, the cupboard. I hear the creaking of the closet opening. Then I hear him walking over to her. I see his brown shoes. They are bright and almond coloured. And then I finally realize what he took out of the closet.

It’s a whip.

Chapter Thirty Three

My blood freezes.

Is he him?

But that isn't the only question troubling me. Did the girl tell him that I was there? She did whisper something. There were many questions jumping in my mind as I try and decide if I should just jump out and confront him. It would be a stupid thing to do, for I had no weapon on me and he had a whip, but I had to do something.

And before I can do anything else, he pushes the girl on the bed, facing him. Only her tanned legs and his legs are visible as he pulls down her panties down till her ankles and then begins to lash her with his whip. She moans in pleasure.

I begin to feel that he's just a kinky guy rather than some heinous killer on loose.

There's some lashing and moaning and then he throws down the whip on the ground and climbs on the bed with her. This is my moment. I grab the lash from the ground and scurry from under the bed to climb to my feet, hoping to find them busy in whatever they were doing, but my hopes shatter as I see a gun aimed at my belly.

Harun smiles and so does the girl. She must have seen me and told him to act normal and cool. I have the whip in my hand but he has a gun. If I do something, he'll just shoot me.

Damn.

Chapter Thirty Four

“Drop the whip,” he says.

I do as I say. There’s one thing I’ve learnt in the army and that is that you must respect and obey the hand that holds the gun.

“Who are you?”

I look around for options. I hope I find something. There’s a lamp on the sideboard and it’s just a few inches away but my hands are up and I’m screwed for now.

“Were you here to steal something from me?”

I see his face. He’s calm and smooth, with a thin, crisp smile over his face. The girl, on the other hand, didn’t even bother to look at me. She just lay there naked and bored. The gun in his hand and a possible robber in the house didn’t startle her and I was sure that she was on some kind of substance. It’s usual for these escorts to snort before meeting a client; it kills the anxiety and soothes them.

I clear my throat and say hoarsely, “Yes.”

“You seem like a decent lad. Take off your mask; I want to see who you are before I report you.”

“You’ll report me with the *nashedi* whore right there?”

I see him growing pale. He whispers to the girl who frowns and protests but then he yells at her to dress up quickly. She slowly reacts to what he has said and begins to wear her clothes after which she asks for her money.

“We didn’t do anything.”

“You can talk to Shekhar about that.”

He grits his teeth and then with his unoccupied hand, pulls out his wallet and hands her five thousand rupees. She takes it, puts it in the bag and walks off, ignoring me as if I don’t exist.

After she leaves, I finally say, “I didn’t come here to rob you.”

“Then?”

“You are the lawyer contesting against Principal Uday Prithvi.”

“I am. And you must be someone from his side. You must realize he’s a bad person, laughing in the face of people’s hopes and desires. He holds a great post but yet he behaves like an imbecile. Not only this. He breaks houses, suspending

poor kids and ruining their lives in the process. He's a sadist. He should be in prison and yet here you are supporting that maniac…"

But I don't let him continue and leap at him. I first go for his hands and box him on his nose. As the gun flies out of his hand, I grab it and smash his teeth and jaw with its butt. I feel his legs wriggling under my legs as I ask him-

"Where are the files?"

His hand flays around and I hit hard, once again.

"Where are the damn files?"

As he moves his right hand again, I realize he's been pointing at a pillow and I had been hitting him for so long without any reason. I leave his head and move to the pillow, which I turn over to find a taped hard drive. I rip it open and keep it at the back of my jeans.

I had saved myself from police and problems. It would have been a huge tension otherwise. I text Principal Prithvi the first thing with a photograph of the hard drive with me to which he doesn't reply but only sends an emoji about being discreet and that he'll save my son from rustication. Then I give first aid to Harun and when I'm done with it, I call an ambulance and threaten him, "If you tell the police, I'll return."

And with that, I leave.

I go to my car and drive to Rajouri Garden. I reach home, open the door with the spare key and move to my room, when my feet freeze as I see an envelope with a name on it lying on the living room table. My family must have kept it there for me. I slice it open to find:

Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell

Uday Prithvi

15 hours

Chapter Thirty Five

I don’t sleep the entire night, trying to jot down all the sins Prithvi had committed and looking over at the poster that we had hung up. None of them matched his. I had three hours more as I had dozed off for seven hours and the other five hours, I researched, hoping to find the hell and his sin.

The man had just put me into dilemma. He did it purposely. He knew it’ll be torture for me. I work my ass off until I get a call from Swati Kaushik.

I am in the chair. I give a shake to clear my head, drink the tea Meena, the maid, had offered and take the call.

“What’s up?” I sheepishly ask. I look at the time. I think Vardhaan will be coming in another ten minutes. He’ll help me.

“I just wanted to update you as you were so interested in the case,” she says.

“What happened? Don’t tell me the evidence has been lost.”

“Why would you say that?”

I bite my tongue.

“No, that didn’t happen. He presented half the evidence but it’s not enough to send him to jail. Harun says he wants a couple of days and police surveillance around his house. Turns out, someone tried to hurt him yesterday.”

“Wait, he had evidence?”

“Oh yeah, a little though.”

Damn! That sneak. He gave me only half of it. I hang up to find a text that I had forgotten to see. It’s another emoji from Uday and this time the emoji says he isn’t happy.

Chapter Thirty Six

I’m confused.

I have two choices. Either I find the hell, save him, and let him suspend my child for not being able to fulfil my promise or I don’t save him and he won’t be able to rusticate because he would be dead before he does that. It’s seven. He would have his decision by ten. I’m stuck. I can save a life or let him ruin my child’s life.

Damn.

I can let him be killed. It’s easier and my conscience would allow it as I, genuinely, am not able to find the hell. But then, I realize that if I do this, I won’t be able to live with myself. He might be a bad man but I am no one to destroy someone’s life. He sure deserved prison and a lot of more things but he didn’t deserve to die, surely. I’m not god. I’m not Yama. There wasn’t any win-win situation here. I needed help.

Vardhaan enters. He seems tired and stretches around.

“What’s with the urgency?” He asks me, yawning.

I show him the letter.

“He’s the guy who’s been the most controversial principal any DU college has ever had. I never understood why he is even allowed to sit on the chair of a principal by the Vice Chancellor.”

“Must be in his good books. This letter was given to me twelve hours back,”

“You only have three hours?”

“And that’s not it.”

I swallow my hesitation and shame and tell him everything. He listens intently, never displaying any emotions until, finally, he lowers his head, touches his hair, pulling it up and says, “I don’t even know who the bad guy here is anymore. Weren’t you supposed to be helping people rather than beating them to death?”

“I had no choice.”

“We all have choices, uncle. We only choose poorly.”

“What should we do? Should we save him or let him die? If we let him die, many people might be happy. But if we won’t, my son will be out of his college and the victims, who reportedly had said that the principal troubled them, will

have a justified life."

"But we'll be indirectly taking a life," he adds.

"That's what haunting me," I smack my fist into the table and sigh, "I don't know what to do."

"What do you want to do?" He asks me. "For, clearly, you have morality issues right now."

I see hurt on his face. We really never had a nephew uncle relationship and were more of friends. But as I look at him now, I realize he's feeling let down and disappointed with me.

And at that moment, I realize what I had to do.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Uday Prithvi woke up to find himself naked with his hands and legs tied with ropes to the ends of the Wall. The smell of bacon, sausages and fish oil from his body made him feel nauseous as he was a strict vegan.

He surveyed his environment to realize he was in a claustrophobic world with barely any light in it, though there were wooden torches nailed across the walls. He blinked hard to find that in the semi-darkness, stood a towering man with a lanky body, with unbelievably glimmering red eyes, which were like volcano eruptions. He had horns, like the devil, jutting out of his helmet. And there was not even a hint of emotion on his face.

“Why…why…”

He didn’t know how he got here. He had been going to the college in his car; with a new driver that his previous had suggested and the next thing he knew was waking up to this horror. *Was this horned man the new driver in disguise?*

And there was a roar. Uday instantly realized that it was the bark was of—a dog, a Doberman pinscher. He recalled his childhood days, when he used to go to his friends house, which had the same dog. His friend used to lock the Doberman as Uday was frightened of it but one day he went to find that his friend was out and the dog was loose in the house. When the Doberman saw Uday, he chased him and even though he had run as fast as he could, the Doberman had bitten his pants off before he jumped from the first floor. He had a broken leg that time and had to stay in the hospital for a whole week. Since that day, he had promised himself never to go close to a Doberman pinscher again.

But here he was face to face with the same dog. As he shivered at the dog’s gleaming black skin and burning, hate filled eyes, he heard another bark and realised that there was not one but two dogs on either side of him. He was wrong. There were not two but a pack of five Dobermans held only by the long leash in the horned man.

The dogs were straining to free themselves and attack him, attracted by the smell of meat and the fish oil that his body was lathered with. The dogs must have looked at him as a big treat of meat.

The horned man wanted that to happen and it was just a matter of time before the leashes were let go and the dogs jumped on him to tear him into small pieces until there was nothing left of him.

Save me.

And then the horned man’s phone rang.

Chapter Thirty Eight

He picked up the phone, pressing the green button.

“You’ve called me at a dire time. You have five minutes, what is it?”

There’s heavy sighing. Iravan must be having a pretty jolly time. “It’s a tough one you gave me this time. You did it purposely.” His voice was like nectar to him, it smoothened so perfectly in his lobes that he just wanted the savour the fear he had created in him. “You wanted me to get confused.”

The man stared at Uday Prithvi, who was sweating and gleaming with all the chicken meat, bacon fat and oils that he had painted over him. “You don’t have a lot of time.” And the dogs barked.

“I was confused between Maharaurava and Sarameyadana. Maharaurava was for the sinner, who inflicted pain on others. In some ways, Uday Prithvi also did inflict emotional and physical pain. And Sarameyadana was for the sinner, who used his wealth and pride for wrong reasons; you know, to plunge other people in fires and destruction. Now, Maharaurava hell with sinners will be eaten by ferocious animals called Rurus and Sarameyadana with seven hundred and twenty ferocious dogs, the sons of Sarama, will eat his flesh.” His voice wavered and broke. “It can be both of them.”

“You need to tell me the hell and the sin. You can’t give me options to decide.” There was a throaty laughter from him.

“Ergh…” he sighed.

“One minute.”

Uday Prithvi yelled loudly.

“He’s there?” the anticipation grew.

“Of course, he is. He doesn’t have the best of bodies, you know.”

“Don’t kill him.”

“That’s not the answer.”

“What do you want? Leave the poor guy.”

“He’s not a poor guy, my friend. He has destroyed so many homes, but worse, he has troubled poor girls. Yes. He had hurt them…” and then he snapped shut, realizing he had spoken more than enough.

Shit.

There was a thin laughter on the other side of the phone. He just revealed the answer unexpectedly, letting his emotions take charge of his behaviour.

“You tricked me,” the man with horns said. “Clever.”

“Of course. The answer is Maharaurava and his sin is that he has troubled a lot of girls, inflicted pain on them, emotionally.”

“Correct.” The man with horns looked down, broken by this and it was hard to admit defeat. “You saved an evil man today. Why would you do that?”

There was silence on the other end, and then slowly the voice cleared.

“I didn’t want to.”

And he hung up.

Chapter Thirty Nine

The news showed everything. Uday Prithvi apparently was found drunk with bottles around him. Swati Kaushik had found him with her leads and Uday was brought to justice in the court. The evidence that was missing from Harun Makhija's house had been found and had been presented to the court. Uday Prithvi sought justice, saying a man in horns had caught him in a cave like place, to which the court assumed he was speaking out of drunkenness.

Uday Prithvi got imprisonment for fifty years.

I smile. Uday Prithvi was finally in jail and he didn't officially sign the rustication, so my son was safe too. Everything was back in order.

"Why didn't you destroy it?" Vardhaan asks me, as we stare at the news channel together. "The hard drive."

"Something told me I shouldn't, so I kept it to be used later."

"You did the right thing."

"Yeah." I saved him, saved my conscience and then sent him to prison him by posting the hard drive to Swati, who then gave it to Harun.

He must be wondering what kind of a sick, twisted robber I was? First I steal something and then I return it.

"What do we do now?" Vardhaan asks.

"We find him, whoever he is, wherever he is."

Vardhaan looks back to find Sarang standing and watching the news from the kitchen, which was adjoining to the living room.

"You need to sort your family time first." Vardhaan taps my shoulders and opens the door to leave.

"What's up, buddy?" I ask Sarang, trying to act chilled out.

"It's good he's in jail."

"Who's your new principal?"

"No idea, the board is deciding and they'll have a meeting with the Vice Chancellor."

"I see. Are you okay?"

He rubs his shoulders awkwardly. "I hope *you* are okay."

“Why won’t I be?”

“Because I came out,”

“I’m happy you did,” I smile. “I should have realized that things tend to change over time. I need to get used to it…no matter how hard it is or how long it takes.”

“Do you have a problem if I hang out with guys?”

I narrow my eyes. “He needs to be nice and respectful, first of all. Is there someone like that?”

He instantly grins. I almost feel my heart melt. That was one genuine smile I saw from him after such a long time. I had started thinking that I won’t ever. Perhaps, coming out, being felt protected and safe made him realize the environment he lived in was not hostile to his preferences now. If I would have let my instincts control me, I would say something harmful, treat him like an abomination or kick him out, he would turn out to be a changed man. I didn’t want that. He is not different, as they say. He’s my son. He’s still the same.

And I couldn’t be more proud of him.

Chapter Forty

I still feel bad for Tapasva Gandhi for having a name like that. I sit at the same boring seat, looking at his bald headed face and sunken eyes as he opens up his patient log and writes my name. He must be having dozens of patients having all sorts of diseases and mental disorders, with secrets and hallucinations and I'm one of them.

I'm one of the crazies.

"How was your week?" He asks me.

"What do you think?"

He leans forward with a pen in one hand and a log in another, where he scribbles and says, "Quite good. You seem rather energetic for some reason."

Do I? Well I don't blame him for inducing that. I've had a week with a guy who considers himself the god of death and who gives me time limits to save someone. Talk about adventure.

"Do you feel alive?" He asks.

"What kind of question is that?"

And he would say 'important kind of question', of course. But he didn't. Rather, he smiles to himself and says, "When you came last time, you seemed off, frustrated, rather bored with your private and professional life and even when you talked about your job, you seemed rather bored. And now, I see you feeling complete and alive. There's an exuberant energy racing in you."

"You can say so, yeah," I hate to admit it but this thrill has been giving me all sorts of adrenaline rushes, and some of them were good.

"You have been getting good cases?"

"I'm saving lives," I cough a tight laugh.

"I must ask you, Mr. Rajpoot, do you think you were actually missing action?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you had a lot of battles, during the nineties in Srinagar, with the militants. You said now it was really difficult to digest but I must ask, did you really hate it there or are you missing it? You are missing the war, aren't you?"

I raise my brows. Was I? This guy played mind games and I let him too. After all, I gave him money for that. "I don't know. I guess you can say that."

“So, the incident we talked about last time was during your army days.”

“Yeah, regretfully.”

“So, what happened after that incident?”

“What do you mean? I told you. I got drunk. I slept. That was the end of it.”

“What happened to the family?” He asks.

I flick my tongue against the cheek. “The woman and the daughter were given safe quarters till the end of the investigation and then they were to be kept in witness protection until the militancy lessened.”

“You fidgeted at the word ‘safe’.”

Damn. He caught me, yet again. I should stop being so surprised now.

“The so called quarters were a small loft, big enough for two people that were protected by commandos, who stayed there too and maintained twenty four hour surveillance.”

“And?”

“They had a tendency to get drunk and enjoy,”

“Who were they?”

“There were two of them and me—I went rarely. I was mostly a field operative.”

“Then what happened?” He gestures with his hand.

I look down and up with confusion. Should I say it or shouldn’t I? But there’s patient-doctor confidentiality.

“You know how Indian army faujis are, right? They don’t get girls or see girls for god knows how long. I was lucky by then. I was newlywed and I took Rutvi with me to Srinagar. It was unsafe, sure, but we had a camp and she was safe there. Anyway, I was out there at the quarter. It had been few years now of protecting the mother-daughter. The daughter was no longer the small kid whose father I had killed. She detested me. It was in her eyes. That is one of the reasons, I avoided protecting them. I was standing there, smoking. I used to smoke back then, now it’s over. I’m done after that cancer scare. I am there, sitting on a stool, talking to the two guys when they get heavily drunk. We laugh and have fun and then this one guy bangs the doors of the quarter. The daughter opens the door and he hits her.”

“Was that allowed?”

“No, but it was something the army did back then, ruthlessly hurting the people.

I don’t know why we did it—perhaps, we were exercising our power, I don’t know.”

“What happened then?”

What happened? I could close my eyes and watch the girl’s face in horror. The soldier had walked to her after slapping her. The mother comes to protect the daughter but the other soldier stops her. I remember looking at that incident and smoking. I was a little drunk too and I would have come in between if it wasn’t for my wife’s thought at the back of my mind. I wasn’t the best of men back then. I saw what they did after hitting her. They loosened their pants, held up their dresses and raped both of them. And after it was done, they shoved them against the ground and threatened their safety if they reported it to the commanding officer. And then they closed the door. I learnt later that this wasn’t the family’s first violation. They had continuous rapes every day until they were sent away from the quarters. I had witnessed only few of them—soldiers getting drunk and having fun but they were never hurt. The soldiers made sure they would do it in the neatest way possible, sometimes threatening them with a gun in their mouth if they didn’t resort to their means.

Tapasva sighs. He seemed disgusted and I don’t blame him. I look back and I see a pool of regret. I should have done something. I should have helped the woman and the child.

“Dear lord,” I cry. “The girl was barely fourteen, you know.”

“Why didn’t you do anything?”

“I only knew violence back then.”

“What happened to the girl and the mother?”

“I guess they were given a new identity and taken somewhere else, perhaps, Jammu or the capital. I didn’t know what happened to them after this.”

“Was this happening to all of them?”

“You mean to all the Kashmiris?”

“Yeah,”

“I didn’t want to know. I chose to be deaf that time. But there was a lot of discrimination and problems out there.”

“And they got over?”

“After the action taken by the human rights commission, sure.”

“Do you blame yourself for that night?”

“Sometimes I do. But I was an immature man back then.”

He scribbles. “Are you the same man now?”

I think about the one I saved and two who had died. If it wasn’t for the previous weeks, I would’ve had another answer but presently I say-

“In a way, I am.”

Chapter Forty One

The coincidental and sad thing about my private life is that the name Kabir I had chosen in Kashmir is similar to the Kabeer my daughter is in love with, though we were both totally different characters. This Kabeer has two ‘e’ to his name while I had an ‘I’. And he was stocky and five feet five inches tall, almost my daughter’s height. He had a tight, sharp face and didn’t lose points on good looks. He had short, decent hair and always wore shirts. He would smile and laugh and act as if he’s the nicest guy ever but I can read people. That’s one thing I’ve learnt the most in army. You need to read people inside out and I did. And he displayed a sort of an off aura. He worked in a property firm, IREO, in Gurgaon, travelling everyday from West Delhi to Gurgaon in his Swift Dzire that his parents had gifted him.

And he had fallen in love with my daughter.

“Are you nervous?” she asks.

I turn to see my daughter, Tara, staring at me. She wasn’t the best of people when it came to loving her father—always rebellious in nature, she had a knack of troubling me. But what to do... she was my daughter, no matter how irritating I found her. Truth be told, as she grew up, she became a feminist, which is a funny thing because she found someone like Kabeer, who was a submissive pig and always listened to her. I have seen in family parties how he caters to her every need, bringing snacks over in a napkin or making drinks for her. He was a dog to her but I had no respect for a person who bent down and let my daughter kick his ass. In a relationship, no one should control. There should be the same level of respect. We lost the term like ‘respect’ in my relationship, Rutvi and me, when she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. It became about surviving then.

“Why would I be?” I reply.

“I don’t know. You aren’t really good at this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember graduation year when you had to come with mom.” She raised her brows.

Of course, I did. She was in her blue gown and her graduation hat, smiling and clicking photographs with everyone. And then she brought her then boyfriend, someone something. I don’t even care to remember his name. I don’t know what was wrong with Tara but something sure was. She was going through her hippie phase and he was the main root of it. He had stringy beaded hair, curly and

haywire, with deep, intense eyes and he smelled of weed.

I grabbed him by his neck and forced him to leave my daughter. He cried and pissed in his pants.

“He changed his hairstyle dad.” She shows his WhatsApp display picture. There is another boy there, with buttoned ups shirt specs and almost crew cut hair. “You destroyed him.”

“I tamed him.” I turn the wheel around.

“What excuse will we give them about mom?” She holds the phone down.

“Suffering from fever,” I sigh. “When will you tell them? It’s not a disgraceful thing, you know.” Most people did treat schizophrenia like that, as if it was a virus anyone can get. After watching ghost possession movies, everyone associated that with a mental disorder.

“After the marriage,” she quietly responds.

I stop the car in front of a ground floor flat where there’s a small porch with a little garden where tulips work their way up. I close the door, press the button to lock the car and move to the door. I knock it and see Tara crisscrossing her fingers nervously and hoping I wouldn’t go crazy today.

They open the door and I find Kabeer standing and grinning at me. He didn’t have perfect teeth. Rather they were uneven and strange.

He welcomes me inside. And I enter with my daughter to meet his parents, the *Trivedis* .

Chapter Forty Two

I find myself in a small flat. Though I don't care if it's small or big but a man notices what house his daughter is going to enter after marriage. I find there are three rooms but the corridors that lead to them is just one. The living room and the dining room are attached. There's no carpet. The walls are greasy and stained, while the floor has mismatched tiles.

Kabeer Trivedi makes me sit on the sofa while his mother comes with a tray with glasses of chilled water. I sip it and keep it on the wooden table.

"How are you uncle?" He asks me.

"I'm good. How's IREO going?"

"The usual, pain in the ass. They keep making me work hard."

"Well, you are an assistant manager; you'll become a manager too." I take another sip as I realize the reason why I'm saying this is because I'm giving surety to myself.

The parents sit with him on the sofa and they look at me in the weirdest manner as if waiting for me to begin. The father is a usual kurta clad man and the mother is the salwar kameez type housewife with dirty hands and braided hair.

"So, Mr. Rajpoot, I see your daughter has liked our son," Mr. Trivedi starts. "I hope you are okay with it."

"I just want my daughter to be happy."

"Then that's great! We have all agreed to it and so I think, it's done. Is Mrs. Rajpoot agreeable to it?"

"Absolutely." I nod. "She has agreed to it."

"May I ask what does your daughter do for work?" Mrs. Trivedi asks and she instantly gets elbowed by Mr. Trivedi.

"I apologize for her ignorance," he says.

"It's all right. It's a general question. She…"

"I'm currently an assistant editor in a publishing company, aunty," she says. And I'm proud that she is, no matter how much of a fighter she was all her life, she sure built a good life for herself.

"Oh that is great. I'm writing a short story actually."

"E-mail me. We are looking for submissions."

I interject. “Well, we already are getting comfortable. That’s nice. I just came here to formalize matters between us.”

“Oh yes, we understand you are a busy man.” Mr. Trivedi smiles politely. “I think we should call the astrologer and begin deciding the date.” I didn’t believe in this but I didn’t care much.

“Sure. I’m cool with it. There’s also one thing.” I say. “How much are you looking for? I mean for my daughter I can give you a car and perhaps ten lakhs, that’s it.”

Their eyes widen at that and they didn’t widen in surprise but in embarrassment and shock of me saying this. I look at Tara, who is eyeing me to stop being such a jerk.

Did I just say that I plan to give them dowry?

Chapter Forty Three

“What the hell was that?” She yells at me as we sit in the car.

“What was what?” I squeakily respond.

“You willingly offered them dowry?”

“But I thought that’s what you wanted me to come here and talk about.”

“Do you really think that I would marry into some family where they are asking for dowry? You know, I’m against all of these stupid things.”

“I was wrong, okay. I just thought you wanted me to do it, so I was being honest…”

“And ignorant as always,” she pauses. “Now what will they think about me? That I have an absentee mom and a rude father.”

“Hey, calm down. Things will be all right. I’ll apologize.”

“Don’t say anything. You’ll offer them bride price again.”

We reach home in an awkward silence and she goes to the stairs, ignoring me. Great—again she’s angry with me. I come out of the car when I suddenly realize there’s a shadow behind me. I turn to find a woman in kurti and pajama, with half of her face concealed with a dupatta. She has many rings in her fingers and her earrings glimmer. She is wearing small slippers and has a tiny frame and has broken teeth.

“Hello ma’am,” I say. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Mr. Iravan Rajpoot?”

“Yes.” I narrow my eyes.

“I am Gulabo.” She pulls down her dupatta from her face to reveal scars and purple and black colour bruises. “I would like your help.”

Chapter Forty Four

I make sure to make her feel comfortable as she already seems hurt and broken. She sits in the living room and looks around intently to see where she is exactly and then smiles. And I know that smile. *I'll never get a house like this in my life.* She sure seemed poor and half dead. Was it a husband problem? It must be or a boyfriend trouble or some random guy troubling her. There were many eve teasing cases these days.

Vardhaan stands with his diary, waiting for her to speak.

"You must be wondering how I got your address?" She smiles. "Have you heard of Pinky?"

Pinky…Pinky…

The name did ring a bell. *Oh yes.* It was during the time when I had been working in a security team for a billionaire, Vinod Bachchan, after I had left army officially to seek better prospects. He needed security and I was the head, working day and night. Apparently, he did a lot of sneaky stuff too and it ended badly for him. He was a married man with a taste for young girls and he would often call them to his suite whenever he was out on a business trip. When we were in Delhi, he called the best of escorts from one Happy Ending spa and one of the escorts was Pinky.

After he was done with them, it was our duty to drop them back, and that was the time when I had a conversation with her. She was a North Easterner and she told me how she got into this business.

"It was all lack of money. I didn't have anything on me."

And she would rant how she had to sleep with rich fat men to earn her daily income. "I don't like it. But I have to do it, sadly."

And now, here was her friend.

"How does Pinky know I'm here?"

"She has her own spa now." The woman replies. "And Gagan is her regular customer."

But wasn't Gagan married? Damn all these people rich people with their prostitute fantasies.

"Oh," I mouth. "So, what happened? Are you part of the spa?"

"No. But Pinky was an okay friend when we were together in GB road and while

she fled and became rich, I stayed there. You see, I have a daughter and our *dallah* isn't the best person."

"I understand."

I see Vardhaan scribbling whatever she was saying like a recorder in the court.

"Is it him that bothers you?"

"No" She shakes her head. "Khan is a sweet man. He's only ruthless with the customers. It's one of the customers, actually."

"What about him?"

"He's Khan's close friend and has some control over him," she replies. "I don't blame Khan. He's a weak guy when it comes to big people and especially when there's money involved. He lets the customer do anything to us if he pays large."

"And that customer pays large to Khan?"

"Big sum, sahib," she says. "He comes every weekend, demands a girl and then leaves her in bruises. Khan has to call a local doctor to mend them."

"And the latest victim was you?"

"Yes." She nods. "Yesterday only he came and did this to me."

"What does he do?"

"He's a bit scary looking. He hits me with his belt…"

"Like flogging?" I ask her, instantly sharing a glance with Vardhaan.

"Don't understand big words, sahib."

"Whipping?"

"Yes. He whips."

Vardhaan scribbles. This is jackpot.

"Can you describe him more?"

"He makes sure we don't know his name. He does it from the back as he doesn't want us to see his face. And then, he cuts our faces with his knife."

"What do you want me to do about this?"

"I want you to find him and report him. Police don't listen to our kind." She shakes her head disappointedly, "They feel that we are the scum and need to be treated this way but they'll listen to you if you give them evidence. You are a respected man."

“I understand.”

She pulls out a stack of money from her blouse. “I only have five thousand, sahib. I earn two hundred from every customer. This is mine and the rest of the girl’s, who are pitching in, money”

“I don’t want it.”

And I didn’t want it for two reason—one, I felt bad for the woman. Being a prostitute in Delhi is horrendous. There are way too many tortures a woman faces there. And two, because I feel this is our guy, Yama. He must be it. He fits the profile. Most psychopaths are beaters. They have a taste for prostitutes.

“I will come there to see this guy. Next time he comes, call me up.” I give her the Panthers official card and I also scribble my personal number at the back.

“ I don’t want to be late, so you will need to make sure you get the information to me beforehand and I’ll try my best to reach there.”

“Thank you, sahib.”

She gets to her feet, bows, looks at Meena and then leaves. I stare at the door for a while before Vardhaan speaks up.

“I don’t think it’s him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yama is delivering justice and by beating a girl up, he is doing nothing but contradicting his own beliefs.”

“He’s a killer, a psychopath. He thinks he’s a good man, probably influenced by Bollywood to right the wrongs and kill those who escape justice but in the end, he’s nothing but a cold blooded murderer and he’s basing his murders on a religious script, to justify his actions. I’m telling you, this is our guy.” I smile viciously.

I got you, Yama.

Chapter Forty Five

Yama sat in front of the mirror as he always did. He looked at his horns and the skull helmet he had made. He took it off and then wiped his forehead of all the sweat. Then he looked at himself in the mirror. It was his reflection that he admired. With his dark hands, he touched the mirror, touching his own inverted hand in it. He liked to paint himself and dress up like Yama sometimes. He found it assuring and helpful. Then, he pulled out his red lenses and he kept it in a white case and with a help of a bucket of water and a towel, he began to wash himself. After doing it again and again, he saw himself a final time and he saw Yama fading and his real image, the one seen by everyone, appearing in front of the mirror.

He went into the shower and slowly let the water trickle down while he took the soapy sponge and began to clean the paint from his body. The water began to grow black and slowly drained out into the gutter and finally he was back to his original self.

Then, the bell rang.

Chapter Forty Six

Yama walked over to the door. He had dressed up by then. He opened it to find the usual, calm face of Brijesh Khanna as he walked in with his cane and maroon glasses, and his two dark skinned guards.

“I told you I had nothing.”

“And that is why I come here.” He walked to the sofa and politely sat down. “You must have forgotten that I have a business to carry. My customers outside want more.”

“I will get it surely.”

“You said.” He paused as he always did. “You said you would be my dealer, my only dealer. You promised me riches and hopes and desires. I stopped hurting people.” He looked back and there was a cold smile on his face. “Those were simpler times. But here you are, and it’s been a week. I need a kidney, my friend otherwise I’ll use yours.”

Use mine?

“I’ll take only one, of course, so you can work with the other.” Brijesh tapped his cane.

The two bodyguards grabbed Yama from behind as he struggled. “Wait… wait…”

Brijesh shook his head as he began laughing. “You promised. I don’t like when people break promises. They are liars then.” He got to his feet as Yama was carried to his dining table. He tried to resist and struggle but the men were twice his size and much stronger.

He could see the ceiling as he lay on the dining table on his back and Brijesh’s face with his toothless smile.

“You are performing a good deed,” Brijesh said. “Don’t worry, you are in good hands. I’m the best out there. I’ll give you a good dose of morphine.”

“I need…uh…I need two days, okay?” Yama was fighting back tears.

“You’ll get it in two days?”

“Yes, I will.” He looked at Brijesh and realised that the man had a dark and ugly soul.

“Wow, that sounds like a promise.”

“Yes, it is.” He swallowed a lump. “Please, I-I…I promise, okay?”

“Again with the promises, my friend.” He rolled his eyes, “I give you two days then.”

“Thank you.”

“I would need something to bring you a pair,” Yama said.

He narrowed his eyes. “What do you want now?”

“The blueprints are in my study—I can show you if your men leave me.”

He nodded, tapping his cane yet again. Yama stood up, cracked his head right to left and walked to the study room where he planned all of his justices. His pulse was fast and he could literally hear blood pumping in his ears. A coldness of the body had temporarily paralyzed him but he made sure that he acted normal and adjust to the highly grappling situation as well. He walked into the study, pulled out a piece of paper from a textbook and handing it over to Brijesh.

“I would like this to be made.”

Brijesh stared at it for a while. “My friend,” he scoffed, “Are you a torturer? What you ask from me is highly expensive. I would need really fresh kidneys for them, you know.”

“You’ll get them in two days, but I want this too.”

“You get me a pair in two days and I’ll build this myself.” He winked. “What do you need it for?”

“I thought we didn’t talk about our personal lives.”

He laughed. “And this is something kinky you do in bed?”

“Of course.”

“Great then, I’ll be waiting for your phone call then. And also, I would give this thingy…” he frowned as he looked at the paper again, “to an engineer to build it for you.”

“Thank you.”

Brijesh tapped his cane and then he walked off with his two guards. Before closing the door, he said- “Till we meet again.” Then he bowed and left.

Yama grabbed the sofa and taking deep breaths, realized what was just going to happen to him. His kidney was about to be taken and stored somewhere. *God. I saved myself.* That’s what happens when you deal with the wrong people.

He sighed and realized that he didn’t have time. He needed to perform another justice. He thought that instrument would be used next, but no. He needed to give kidneys but he couldn’t kill an innocent. No, he had to do it to someone who deserved it really but not as much as others. He walked to his study again, locked the door behind and looked at yellow post-its on his wall. There were names like Daksh Galgotia, Rohan Khan and Uday Prithvi and under their names their sin was written. He searched and then finally managed to pull out a name.

Kabeer Trivedi.

Chapter Forty Seven

My daughter is a reckless person and it was time that I had a talk with her. I knock on her door and wait for her to respond. It is a Saturday afternoon and she has decided not to come for lunch. Rutvi told me that she would talk to her but I decided it was father-daughter time. I had reconciled things with Sarang and I hope accomplish the same with Tara.

I knock at the door twice before she screams from the other end- “What!”

It isn’t a question but rather a simple word being spat at me.

“Can I talk?”

“No, you can’t.”

“Just for a minute, I promise I won’t piss you off,”

She opens door, dressed in a t-shirt and a pyjamas.

“Can I come in?”

She moves away from the door and jumps on her bed. Even though she is a working woman, she behaves like a teenager. I remember the time when she was caught with a pack of weed and instead of behaving apologetically, she got super angry because her privacy was invaded. That was what Tara Rajpoot always was. But I think she got all of it from me—the anger, the ruthlessness.

She pretends to watch TV and I shake my head as I look at her room. It’s plain, with a bed, a coloured wall with her pictures taped on it and a revolving fan.

“What’s the problem now?” I am in my boxers as I am mostly during weekends, but I have a suit packed and ready for the letter to come and the action to begin, which begs the question, till when will I keep running for him? I need to find him soon, but before that, I need to save my family too. “What happened?”

“He doesn’t want to marry me anymore.”

“What?” I raise my brows.

“Kabeer,” she sighs. “He called me up and said that because of some financial problems at home, he wants to delay it. You scared them off, dad. You made them feel cheap when they weren’t. How does that make you feel?”

Quite good, actually.

“He is giving you a cold shoulder now?”

“Well, duh, of course. What do you expect he would do after you asked his

family about *dahej* ? And before I know it, he'll breakup with me too." But she didn't cry after saying that as I thought she would. But I know, when I leave the room, she'll start sobbing. She was a silent crier, the kind who keep their weeps discreet.

"If he loves you truly, he won't."

"But he loves his family more," she says without even glancing at me. "Can't say the same about myself."

I sigh. I go to the bed and sit down as I slowly look at her with sheer awkwardness. Why was I embarrassed? Did I also know I wasn't a good father?

"I'm sorry," I say and I realize I'm saying this for the first time to her. And I actually mean it. "I can apologize to them too. I don't want you to suffer from daddy issues," I joke

"You don't have to do anything. You never did understand me."

"You never let me," I respond.

She switches off the TV and tosses the remote away. "Remember the time I was in school, primary years and there was a PTM to discuss my grades and my behaviour in class."

"Yeah?"

"Do you even remember going for that?"

I bit my tongue as I realize I don't. It wasn't my indecency that she felt horrible about but the absence of me in her life. I wanted to say so much more but I got a call.

"Sahib Rajpoot?"

I instantly recognize the voice. "Gulabo?"

"He's coming tonight…" she whispers.

I am about to begin and tell her that I'm coming when I see Meena with an envelope in her hands.

Chapter Forty Eight

It takes me almost one hour to get ready and leave for CP. I wear my suit, grab a pistol for reasons I'm not sure about and as I sit in my car, I call Vardhaan.

"I'm coming too," he says. "Pick me up from the Jhandewalan metro station."

I think about convincing him to stay away from harm's way but he was in college and I needed a smart kid backing me up there. What was I going to do? Click photographs, I guess. I don't know. All I know is that I had to see that face, know the name, interrogate to know more about him and then do what I had to do—save a poor woman's life. He was about to come today to hold a girl down and lash her and I couldn't let my conscience allow him to do that. Also, I wanted to see if he was Yama or not. I had to be close to him even though I could feel that he was the one. Most serial killers are sadists, pathetic and worst of all, ordinary.

I pick Vardhaan up from the bustling Jhandewalan and drive to GB road. I give the envelope to Vardhaan, who after reading it, squeaks-

"Isn't that…"

"Tara's boyfriend, 10 hours, he's reducing the time limit with every victim," I nod. "Yep. We have double worries."

"Does that mean he must have done something brutal?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I've seen the kid, Vardhaan. I know how he is. He's the ugliest dog a person can have, and sadly that person is my daughter. I can't say that to her and I know you won't say too."

"Then why is he killing an innocent man?"

"Because he must be in need of something, perhaps satisfying his craving, whatever it is, I know for sure that Kabeer is nothing but a straight forward guy. Sure, he has an eerie aura about him, but it's only because he's too normal and neat."

"We should be looking into it then, don't you think?"

"We'll spend a little time here and then look into it. We have fifteen hours, right? We need to set our priorities."

"You really want him to die, don't you?" He chuckles.

"I won't miss him, I know that for sure."

I stop the car and see the dingy, dark pit hole we were going to enter.

“Your mom will kill me if she gets to know I’ve brought you here.”

“It’s okay, I’ve come here before.”

I widen my eyes. “You kidding me, aren’t you?”

“I wish I could, but I did come here and I didn’t do anything. It was just experiencing stuff. My friends had fun here. I just stayed outside and got my wallet stolen.” He rolls his eyes.

“Well, you are with me,” I say, thinking a six feet three inch guy would actually make a difference. “So, let’s go in.”

We lock and leave the car outside under a shade and walk a few yards to enter the lane. GB Road is nothing but a place with dead rats scurrying around and by rats I mean, men. It’s littered with greasy men of all sizes, colour and ages. And these rats chase cheeses, who are women, staring through iron grilled windows and begging for their knight in shining armours to take them away from here. The lingering smell of betel leaves and cow dung permeates the air and you can see shit everywhere. The place is not small and I wonder why it’s called a road. It has many five storey buildings that are numbered and called Kotha No. 1, Kotha No. 2 and so on.

I see people staring at me, but I ignore them. Vardhaan, whose hands are in his pockets to make sure that nothing is stolen, also does the same. We enter Kotha No. 10 as told by Gulabo and as we do, we see spiralling wooden staircases going up. Each floor has three rooms but these rooms don’t have doors. They have chunnidaars to conceal what’s beyond. The tiles are dirty and the place smelly. I can hear moans of men and groans of women from the ugly bright pink rooms. I see a girl running with her broken toy car and acting as if the car is real and she’s driving it. I feel sad to see that the girl would grow up to be part of this Kotha, and work like other women. It’s a depressing scenario but these poor women don’t have a choice. Most of them are Nepali emigrants and some are from West Bengal, Jharkhand and other parts of India. It’s a life of bondage.

I call Gulabo and tell her we are there.

“And he’s here too,” she whispers, “I’m coming downstairs.”

We wait for a while, when we hear a voice.

“Salaam Alaikum.”

We turn to find a man with a thick beard, short hair and kohl rimmed eyes in a

shining grey kurta.

“I’m Khan,” he says and bows a little. “How can I help you two?”

We share a glance. He was the last person we wanted to meet right now. I begin to speak when we hear another voice.

“Khan sahib,” Gulabo says, jumping down the stairs, with her face concealed with a dupatta, “They are my customers.”

“You know them?” He narrows his eyes, watching us intently. “I’ve never seen these two here.”

“They were here last month, the time you left for the masjid.”

“Eh? And these two together with you?” He spat. “Never!”

“But they always do it.”

“Hey, chikni,” he yells, “I am not into two guys and one girl. Only one and one,” he gestures with his fingers. “Understand?”

I look at Vardhaan, who frowningly leaves the place immediately.

“I could have given him another maal, re.”

“He is into Gulabo only,” I reply.

Khan comes up to me and whispers, “Why, re? Look at her. She’s old and bruised. Now, don’t ask me how. Customers nowadays are seeing too many kinky things and want new things. They pay extra. Do you want the same with a younger girl, clean sort?”

I grit my teeth. I feel like punching and breaking his teeth, then chopping his off and selling it off in Chandni Chowk market for free. But I don’t. Gulabo grabs my hand and takes me upstairs to her room as I see the Khan smiling viciously at me. I think about Vardhaan and what he might be doing but I have to be strong if I have a firsthand look at Yama.

I move through corridors, watching sweaty men with protruding appendages kissing women with opened blouses. I make sure I don’t see all of it because it’s dirty and disgusting. And I’m not talking about girls. I’m talking about the slimy men. I finally reach her room. It’s light blue in colour with a small table on the side and a short bed where a young girl sleeps peacefully.

“She leaves when a customer comes,” she tells me and I realize at that moment, what sort of physical remnants this bed sheet must be harbouring, but I don’t want to think about it much.

“Does she know?”

“She’s not stupid.” Gulabo shakes her head.

I see some books on alphabets and English on the side. She must be homeschooled. “Where is he?”

“I heard Khan talking to him on phone. He calls him chacha for some reason.”

“Who’s the next girl?”

She slightly parts the drapes and lets me see the opposite room where a girl in a kurti is sitting, staring blankly at the wall. If I guessed correctly, she must be no more than eighteen. I understand the expression on that brown and tired face. It is the expression of brutal inevitability.

“Tinny is her name,” Gulabo says.

“Chacha is going to come to her today according to what Khan said.”

“When today?” I look at my watch. It’s already seven.

And before she could say anything, I hear the sound of clattering footsteps. Tinny instantly gets to her feet and glances. I can’t see who is coming from the corridor but I can see the pale and hopeless expression on Tinny’s face. She sighs, closes her eyes, and perhaps chants a prayer or two, before she sits back on the bed.

The shadow becomes visible and soon that shadow has a flesh—a shirt and a pant, as I see Chacha’s back. I don’t see his face. I grab for my gun. I don’t know why I do it because if I shoot him, I’ll be in trouble but I really want to shoot him as I imagine what he would do to the poor girl in the room. He enters Tinny’s room, and for a second, I can see her face before he turns to draw the drapes, revealing himself to me.

And I see his face. I know him. I know him really well because he is Kabeer Trivedi, the man my daughter fell in love with.

Chapter Forty Nine

Vardhaan had only seen him in the photographs but in reality, he looked a bit different. Kabeer had walked up there and entered the building, not noticing Vardhaan at all. He didn't know him. He would have known him if there was a marriage, but seeing Kabeer here put everything in perspective as to why he wasn't the right guy.

His instincts told him something was wrong. Vardhaan couldn't stop himself and decided to go inside and have a look himself.

But before he could do it, it hit him. Kabeer's name on the envelope! *Can it mean beating prostitutes considered as a sin?* He narrowed his eyes as he reached for his cell phone but realized that he had kept it in the car.

Shit.

He was afraid of his phone being stolen again, for he had placed it on the dashboard. His phone had a picture of the hell chart that he had made. He tried to remember the hell or the sin, anything related to beating girls but then he realized, that if Kabeer's name was on the envelope, then he could not be Yama; he was one of the sinners.

What was Iravan going to do now? Was he going to hurt the man he's supposed to save in a few hours? But then, it's his daughter's lover. What will happen?

Oh shit.

Chapter Fifty

I pull away the drapes and walk to the room. Gulabo tries to stop me but I just shrug her hands and keep walking until I see the purple drapes, inches away from me. I pull them away and find myself in a weird fantasy of this man. He is standing there fully clothed for now and he has a pocket knife in his hand, threatening Tinny to suck his toe and she is kneeling down like a puppy while he smacks her on her head.

He sees me and at the moment, I see them both—the man he shows to Tara and the man he is now. There's a reflection of both. I could feel his nervousness, the anger bursting in me as I grab his shoulders and toss him out.

"Uncle…" he puts his hands together, "I…am…I am sorry,"

I raise my brows. I burst with exploding fury. I walk up to him and with a flying kick, hit him over the face. Then pull him up and throw him in another girl's room, where he smashes into a fat and moustached man's tummy. The man yells and covers himself up, rushing outside with the naked girl.

With the butt of my pistol, I hit his forehead. "They call you chacha here, don't they ?"

"I'm…uh…sorry,"

"You thought you could marry my daughter?"

"She…"

"Why do you do this, eh?" I grab him and hold him tightly. "Do you even know because of these antics of yours, a man wants to kill you?" *And by that, I didn't mean me.* I was still bound by law, but not Yama. And there was a thin line where I wanted him to be, tortured or saved. "And you made Tara think it was *my* fault?"

"Please, uncle."

I hit him again on the forehead and he became unconscious. At that moment, I realize the prostitutes and their customers are staring at me. The prostitutes have thin, sly smiles over their lips that they can't suppress. I see Gulabo, who has tears in her eyes. Did I just do a right thing by hitting him?

I leave his bloody collar and let him cough and suffocate in his own blood, which has started flowing on the tiles. I look at his face and I feel good. Not because I hit him but because all of these women are silently applauding me while their customers stand frozen with tense expressions on their faces. At that

moment, I wonder whether Yama thought that way too? Did he think that by killing all of these people, the people who were sinners, the world was silently congratulating and applauding him?

I realise then that Yama considered himself a hero in his own twisted way and the surprising part is that I am slowly coming to believe that as well.

Chapter Fifty One

Everything ended in a decent way, wrapped as a gift with a red ribbon on top. Khan found out and threw me out, which was fine with me. We went back home and I poured myself more than a few drinks that evening. I had hit someone so brutally after a very long time. I didn't tell Tara who her boyfriend really was, but after this, I was pretty sure that he wouldn't contact her anymore. I made sure to take his phone where there were photographs of prostitutes. I was surprised Tara had never checked his phone. It was filled with indecent pictures. I sent all of them to Tara from his phone and then tossed it on his unconscious chest. Tara might just breakup now, even though she might be left wondering how someone can willingly send them out. Let her wonder. She shouldn't know about her guardian angel.

It's the next morning when I decide to call him.

"Are you missing me, Mr. Rajpoot?" says Yama, slyly.

I'm sitting in the room watching the chart with Vardhaan sitting behind me, confidently.

"I know why you wanted to hurt him."

"You are getting fast," he rasps, "I might just lower the time frame to make it a tad bit uncomfortable for you next time."

"It's *Puyoda* , the Narak. His sin was having illicit relationship with a prostitute, not beating up a prostitute actually as I thought it would be. If I wouldn't have found it, you would've kept him in a water container with puss, semen and all the disgusting things in the world."

"I would be more innovative than what they say in Gita," he scoffs.

I sigh. "You chose the wrong guy, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"He was my soon to be son-in–law."

There's an unsettling pause. "And what makes you think I chose the wrong guy?"

"You knew?"

"Of course, I did," he says. "He was never part of the plan."

"And what plan did you have?"

He laughs hysterically. His voice grows into this metallic snarl. “You never wondered why I gave you my cell phone number. I mean, think about it. What kind of a boring villain am I now? I could’ve communicated with you through letters only but I still gave you a phone number. I wanted to feel what you felt, you know, that’s why I did it. I liked your exhausting voice slowly leaving your body as you tell me the hell and the sin. It’s so exhausting that it reaches to the point of being funny.”

I stand up, flaring my nose. “What plan did you have?”

“Read the letter again, minding the words I just said to you.”

I hang up the phone and yell at Vardhaan to get the letter fast. He ruffles through the desk, looking from folder to folder and picks up four letters. He shuffles through them, finally catching the last one and tossing the others. He opens them and hands it over to me. I look at the written words, in calligraphy and touch them, hoping to find some similarity or some other name.

What did he mean? There’s no other name than Kabeer Trivedi over it.

Minding the words I just said to you?

What did he say? He said about why he gave me his phone number. That’s not…

Wait.

The lemon, the water, the mixing of it…he did it again. And this time, he did it cleverly. That’s the reason he reminded me of the number. It was in hidden ink, just like his other message. I switch on the standing lamp and keep the paper under it. In a faint scrawl, I could see the vile plan of his.

Find the hell to the sin and the sin to the hell

Fariq Abdullah

10 hours.

I don’t know anything about Fariq Abdullah, never heard of him. I decide to call him again to ask that asshole a few questions.

“You played me, you little shit?” I yell, hoping my family won’t hear me going all ballistics. I could see Vardhaan staring at me with in complete tension and wonderment.

“I just distracted you. I wanted you to find about your son-in-law too. Sadly, you didn’t find out about him from me but from some wench. You saved your daughter from a horrible marriage, you know. She would’ve gotten hurt, so in a

way, I am happy to now throw him in Puyoda. He suffered enough at your hands. Oh yes, I saw him in the hospital. You disfigured him and that poor soul says it's an accident because he doesn't want his parents to know what he did. How does it feel to be me?"

"That was what it was, right? You wanted me to be like you."

"Oh, I am slowly turning you into me," he laughs cheekily. "Only a matter of time when you'll be playing this game with someone else."

"Who is Fariq Abdullah?"

"That's your worry," I flick my tongue against the inner cheek harshly. "You have ten hours. Your time starts now."

Chapter Fifty Two

I didn't take time to dress up again. Weekend was the only time I was able have some time for my family and I was feeling bad about not being able to do that. I throw the keys to Vardhaan, so that he could go down to the parking and take the car out while I wash my face.

I come out in my suit with a wet face and a towel in hand when I see Tara standing quietly at the door.

"What happened?"

"Where are you going?"

"Got an urgent investigation today,"

"Did you hear about Kabeer?" She asks.

I didn't have time for this but then I realize that I never do, so I hug her tightly. She freezes and I can feel her body going stiff before she loosens up and wraps her arms across my back and holds me tightly.

"They say he was at GB road and got beaten up by some *lafangas.* I got pictures too. I think those people wanted me to see it. I sure have some weird guardian angels."

"What do his parents say?"

"Hate him for sure but he's very badly hurt so he's being taken care of right now. I'm worried about him, you know," she says. "Even though he was a bad man, I'm worried for him. I don't know why."

"You are a good person."

"But I won't see him now. Are you happy?"

"Not particularly."

She pulls back and smiles. "Don't worry, I was being hasty. I'll take some time off and do only work till I find a better guy in my life."

"You do that." I grin.

She nods and begins to move when I say, "Hey listen, wait."

"What happened, daddy?" She says that word after a long time.

"I just want you to know that even though I'm not here with you always, I'm always near you and protecting you without you knowing it."

“Like Batman?” She raises her brows.

“Like Batman.” I say, smiling.

And that’s a first time after a long time. I actually feel connected to my daughter again and for some reason, I feel I have less regrets in life now.

Chapter Fifty Three

Yama slammed the phone down, realizing the mistake he had committed. He hadn't known Kabeer Trivedi was Iravan Rajpoot's son in law. He should have done a better background check rather than choosing the sinners without a second thought. He was lucky with that he had written another name hidden with the ink. He had been fortunate this time but he won't be always.

He looked at his wristwatch and realized he didn't have a lot of time. Brijesh may be coming at night and if he had to get those kidneys, he had to work fast otherwise his life would be in danger.

Chapter Fifty Four

I don’t know anything about Fariq Abdullah as he wasn’t a famous personality like Rohan Khan and Daksh Galgotia. What could be his sin?

“There are many Fariq Abdullahs on Facebook,” Vardhaan informs me.

“Search the one in Delhi.”

Fariq Abdullah was a common name, especially in Dubai and Pakistan and in Kashmir, but in Delhi, only certain areas like the Jama Masjid might have someone of the same name. It was twelve o clock and we had time till ten o clock. I set the timer for nine, so that I could get a head start of one hour if we run late by any chance.

“In Delhi, there are three Fariq Abdullahs.”

“Any addresses?” I ask.

“There is only one with an address.”

“Write it down.”

He scribbles it in his diary and asks- “What about the other two?”

“You do your thing.”

He nods and then he goes and starts typing with his eyes fixed on the laptop screen. I know what he’s doing. He breaks through the firewalls and tries to find the IP address of the two Farooq Abdullahs. Meanwhile, I look at the address he has given me. It’s close by, in Naraina, opposite the PVR complex.

“What if the Fariq Abdullah Yama wants us to find is not on Facebook?” Vardhaan asks while typing on the keypad of his laptop.

“Then we better hurry.”

I race through the inner roads and lanes of the Naraina, asking people the directions to A-Block No. 14. As we reach the address, I ask Vardhaan to accompany me but he is too busy fiddling with his technology. I go up the stairs of the stony apartments and ring the bell and, after a couple of attempts, realise it isn’t working. I knock on the door, dig my hands into my pant pockets and wait before the door opens and I find a young boy, perhaps of Vardhaan’s age, standing in front of me.

“Hi, I’m looking for Mr. Abdullah.”

He raises his brows. “I’m sorry, who are you?” He asks politely.

“I have few questions for Mr. Abdullah.” I pull out my Panthers card. “I work at a firm.”

He looks at it. “Um, I’m sorry, but my dada has passed away.”

Chapter Fifty Five

I come back and sit in the car.

“What happened?”

“Wrong guy.”

“Wrong guy?”

“This Fariq Abdullah died just few months back. He was eighty four. Who’s our second guy?”

He presses few buttons and then shows it to me. There is some coding on a blue screen, which is beyond my comprehension. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head at my lack of tech and tells me-

“There’s a Fariq school teacher and there’s a Fariq retired writer.”

“Do writers retire?”

“Like Ruskin Bond.” He says gesturing.

“Did Ruskin Bond retire?”

“I sometimes feel he has.”

I start the engine and drive, pressing on the gas pedal. “We must decide who we are.” I say jokingly.

“What do you mean?”

“Who is the John Watson and the Sherlock Holmes in our pair?”

He scoffs. “We are more of Chacha Chaudhary and Sabu.”

We both look at each other at that comment and say almost at the same time- “Let’s keep it Iravan and Vardhaan, should we?”

We drive to the next Fariq Abdullah’s house. He lives in North Campus and it takes us one hour to reach the Mukherjee Nagar residence of the retired writer.

“He was a lecturer in Hindu College,” says Vardhaan, looking at the man’s Facebook profile. “Seems like a good guy.”

“Whatever I’ve seen and whatever has happened till now has taught me that there are no good guys,”

“Have you noticed something?”

“What?”

“There’s a pattern to what he does,” says Vardhaan. “He always kills men, if you notice.”

“Well…”

“He’s anti-men,” he says. “He could’ve also chosen any sinner from the other sex but he didn’t.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“What if Yama is a woman?”

“I’m pretty sure we have heard a man over the phone.”

“You know when I came up with this theory, I actually googled it. Turns out that lot of women have a strong throat that allows them to speak in different voices, hoarse, girly, and whatever. We always heard Yama speak in a metallic voice. What if he’s trying to hide the fact he’s a she?”

“Why would a woman want to kill all of them?”

“Don’t you see,” he sighs. “After the 2012 gang rape case, everyone wants to be a vigilante. Feminism is also rising and women want justice. What if she’s some twisted woman, who also wants justice from men and is killing them to feel good about the fact that she’s doing a favour to other women? Think about it.”

It does make sense.

He pauses and sighs as I make our way through the lanes. It has started pouring and we are forced to take shelter from the rain under a Mother Dairy booth awning. We notice other people too taking shelter from the rain under a shed nearby and Vardhaan runs across to ask a few questions about our man. He comes back drenched after a little while and informs me that he’s heard that Fariq Abdullah lives his life on the edge. He doesn’t meet or speak to anybody and whenever he comes out of his house, he is always reeking of booze.

“Did they tell where he is exactly?” I ask as the IP address that he has unearthed has just the name of the area but not house numbers.

Vardhaan nods and he points in a direction. We stop in a gully and begin to move upstairs and knock on a door. As I wait for the iron grilled doors to open, I look at my wristwatch. It’s five already. I have five hours more and then one more life will be at stake. I understand that even though I was successful in saving two people, I was no better than Yama. The only difference between me and him was that he tortured and killed, while I mostly used smart methods to imprison them and beat them up, as in Prithvi and Kabeer’s cases.

As I wait for Mr. Abdullah to reveal himself; I am hoping he's not another dead man. He's not.

He opens the door and I find a short man with a pot belly standing in front of me, stinking of alcohol and tobacco.

"What?" He spits on the floor where he stands.

We step back.

I see his tired face and sheepish expression and know that I am looking at a man who has been weighed down by the burden of his own problems.

"I am from Panthers." I give him my card. He looks at it for a while and then tears it apart.

"You are an investigator," He scoffs at me. "Come in."

I am a little surprised at his sudden interest in me and blame it on the glamorisation of our breed in films and novels but I know in my heart that we are no heroes or great defenders of the human race, but just very ordinary people trying to eke out a living for ourselves.

I find his house reeking with the smell of alcohol and weed. I also find myself staring at a woman, who is lying there on the couch. The woman doesn't notice us and keeps sleeping. The flat is dark with only a trickle of light coming through the slight parting in the heavy curtains.

"We need to ask you few questions if your wife doesn't mind," I say, glancing again at the woman, who I think is his wife.

"What's wrong with her?" Vardhaan asks.

"We fought."

Is she dead? I carefully stare at her and I see little bruises over her face and her mouth. There's blood too but not too much. She wasn't sleeping; she was unconscious.

"Do you hit her often, Mr. Abdullah?"

"What's that to you?"

I had to calm myself. Vardhaan realises that I am boiling with anger from inside and grabs my arm and squeezes it gently to make sure that I stick to the matter on hand and not end up beating the old man. I realize that almost every other sinner in Yama's list is some sort of a beater. Either he is a beater of prostitutes or wife.

“Your RWA wanted a background check on everyone who lives here, so we just have few questions for you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, tell the RWA to screw itself and you two get out. I thought you guys might just spice up my life by telling me about your cases but you come here to conduct boring business, so get out before I call the cops.”

“They won’t like to see beaten up women on the sofa.”

He chews something in his mouth; it’s a paan that he had kept it in the corner of his mouth while he was savouring his whiskey.

“Aren’t you a fancy man?” He grins again and I see his red paan stains on his incisors. “What’s your thing with woman beating? Don’t you think they deserve it?”

“Not more than men being lashed.”

“Can I use your bathroom?” Vardhaan asks, suddenly.

Fariq arches his brows, nods and then directs him to the washroom. He returns to our conversation and tells me- “I am not a bad man, whoever you are, mister.”

“A person who has hit a woman is a bad man,” I grit my teeth.

“She misbehaved, guruji.”

I roll my eyes. “You were a writer right?”

“I was, yes.”

“What happened?”

“I lost inspiration.”

“Have I read any of your books?”

“I mostly wrote short stories for magazines; earned a good living out of it too.”

I glance at the entire house and I know how much of a good living he was talking about. “Do you have any crimes affiliated to you, anything in the records?”

“I said I won’t talk. I don’t care what the RWA says. This is my home, no matter what they say. They can call the police if they want to.”

“I won’t ask you anything then. You seem like a nice fellow.” I muster up an angry grin just as Vardhaan returns.

We say bye and leave. As he slams the doors behind, I curse a million words. I sit in the car and smack the wheel. “Damn that guy! That poor woman, I wonder

what she might be going through with him. I'm calling the police."

"He can be our guy. You should actually."

I give Zoravar a call. The SHO picks up and I tell him everything. He tells I need to write a FIR first.

"Come on, man. Just tell someone to look into it, please."

He sighs. "It's not an easy thing, Iravan."

"Just do something. I want her out of there."

"Fine, fine," he laughs. "Since when have you become so woman protective? I remember…" He stops. "Err...I'll look into things, don't worry. I'll tell another station officer. Which place did you say you were at, Mukherjee Nagar, right? I'll make a call." And he hangs up the phone.

I know what he wanted to say. Bad memories flood my mind as I realize I wasn't the ideal husband I professed to be. People think of me as a person who supports his wife even in the times of her distress and illness but in reality, I was a beater myself.

But that was 2004.

This is 2015. I have changed.

"I was inside, looking through his stuff, and believe me, there's nothing out there. I mean, that guy is not really clean but he's definitely out of the crime zone." Vardhaan opens up the hell chart on his cell phone and stares at it. "There's nothing about hitting a woman in twenty eight hells. Sure, there is intention of malice over another individual but I don't think this can be it."

"He's put us in a dead end and I can't even fake about my guessing his next victim as he will catch on that I am fibbing."

"He can't be our Fariq Abdullah," says Vardhaan, "I mean, sure, he seems dirty and hellish, but he's nothing like the pattern. All other men were upstanding citizens."

"I think we should look at the third Fariq Abdullah," I add.

"Yeah." He nods.

I start the car again. I have only a few hours and I don't know what will happen, but I know that I would have to use some name of hell, otherwise he might just kill another man. I'm halfway to the third destination when I get a call from Zoravar.

“What’s up?”

“You said Fariq Abdullah in Mukherjee Nagar, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the station officer had sent his sub inspector there and they have found the unconscious wife but not Fariq.”

“What do you mean?”

“It looks like a break in, a forced entry. Thanks for updating me, man. This might help us getting some respect for the department. How did you get on to him?”

I instantly realize the forced entry might just be Yama trying to collect his sinner. “My client wanted him investigated.”

“Well, your client is a funny person. Thank him from us,” he coughs a laugh. “And also, one thing. I don’t know how you would react to this but did you enter the man’s house?”

“Well, he allowed us.”

“And you saw his wife?”

“Yeah.” I nod to myself as I put him on speaker for Vardhaan to hear too.

“Bhagwaan ji, he is a twisted individual,” he grunts, “Did you check if she was breathing?”

“Why would I check that?”

He sighs loudly as if being compulsorily dramatic about it. “It’s... uh... the sub inspector found out she was unconscious because she had been stabbed, most likely by the husband. She’s in the hospital fighting for her life. I’m sorry but you helped us to a lead, thanks for that,”

And slowly, I realize what the grease on her apron was.

Chapter Fifty Six

I don’t really understand what to feel--A husband hurting his wife to such an extreme and then inviting us in to see it. He wanted to make sure no one knew about it. There was no smell of blood as the air had been polluted with weed smoke. But one thing was sure; this is the man Yama wanted. He came inside, broke the doors, and grabbed him after we left. Yama might be now having him and I had only two hours to help.

But the good thing was, we were prepared; we knew the sin. It was all in the front of us, waiting for us to grab hold of it and we did.

After we discuss thoroughly about the hell, Vardhaan with his fingers crossed waits, while I dial the number and let the phone be on speaker. The phone rings for a while before the thin, slimy rasp of Yama corrodes my ears.

“Hello, Mr. Rajpoot,” he says, “You aren’t late. Fascinating.”

“Why do you do this?” I ask him because I have time and the liberty to stall in order to know more about his psyche.

“Do you have the name of the Narak?”

“Why do you do this?”

“Why do I do what?”

“Hurt these people. I’m not saying it’s wrong because slowly as you are taking me down in this spiralling world of morality, I’m questioning the very vices our society holds. But I ask you this: if you consider yourself a vigilante and a man doing good deeds, why do you torture them and kill them rather than handing them to the police? They’ll be imprisoned and they’ll be gone.”

“Do you know anything about Indian history, Mr. Rajpoot?”

“I know quite a lot.”

“Then, you must have figured the torturing methods of mine are just imitations of the past. There were many kings, who used to exercise such tortures upon the scum, in a manner similar to what is prescribed in holy texts. Many of them even imagined themselves as instruments of justice.”

“You do what the past says?”

“Not really. That’s just me being rational with you. I do it because it’s fun.” And there is a loud, screeching laugher on the other end, as if two pieces of metal are being rubbed against each other.

“Authorities in India are nothing but a bent down ass waiting to be kicked. They want us to believe in them but they don’t believe in themselves. They work as corrupt organizations that are funded by hard-earned public money. We live in a world of sinners and horror. Utopia is now just a farfetched dream. If I do what you say I should do, and hand the people over to the government, they’ll be free in no time. Their punishment need to be more severe and more disturbing. They deserve to die the according to their crimes. There’s an old saying, Mr. Rajpoot that say that for every crime there is a deserving punishment. You commit the crime, you get the punishment. I do what I have to do. I do what this society wants me to do. Do you really think they want people like Daksh Galgotia, Rohan Khan, Uday Prithvi in their world? No, they want a safer place. They want a world where their eighteen year old daughters can go out at twelve in the night without fearing any man. They want their ten year old son going out without the fear that some man will hand them toffees to rape them and sell them. Our society has crumbled and it’s built on people’s sins. Each day, these sins are growing into something bigger. And a person like me is just trying to stop that from happening.”

“You consider yourself a superhero, don’t you?”

“I’m Yama,” he says, “I am not a superhero, I’m a god. And I’m the bringer of light. ”

I sigh. “It’s Andhakupa and Fariq’s sin is that he has intentionally tried to perform malice on another person and that is his wife. Andhakupa is the hell where such people are attacked by birds and insects and all sorts of reptiles.”

“Interesting.”

“What?”

“I thought you would think out of the box but you have disappointed me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are wrong.”

I blink hard. “But…but…no I’m right.”

“Ayahpana,” he says smoothly, “Ayahpana is a narak where alcoholics go, the ones who give up everything to *nasha. ”*

“But…but…”

“It’s all right. There’s always the next time.”

He hangs up the phone. I read what Ayahpana is and I realize that Fariq

Abdullah will be drenched in molten iron.

Chapter Fifty Seven

Swati Kaushik had heard it all. She had been hearing it since the time of Uday Prithvi. When she had met Iravan, she knew something was up, hence she had used a GSM audio bug on his cell phone, which she had bought on the internet, which let her hear the conversations he had with people. It all used to come on her phone. And she was right. Iravan was connected to the man, who used to call her and that man had a name—Yama.

But she did not want to go to the authorities. Yama was right about one thing—the government was corrupt.

She decided that she had to find this man. Iravan was just a stupid guy letting himself being played around. He could easily have taken his family to a safe place and told the police but he had a death wish or so it seemed. He liked swimming in shark infested waters.

But Iravan was not her target. It was Yama, as it might be a brilliant story for her—finding a vigilante, who performs heinous tortures on sinners; she could even see the tagline with her name under it and her receiving accolades for her work. It would be all over the news and print media. She could even see the limelight and her escaping from the hellhole she worked in presently.

She got a call from her friend, Arjun, who was working with The Bharat Times.

“You got what I asked for?”

“No hello or how you are?” He grunted. “You could be a little sweet to me, you know.”

“Do you have it?”

There was silence at the other end and she knew what kind of silence it was—he was trying to find the file that he had been searching for. “I did actually, and it turns out that you are right. Rohan Khan, Uday Prithvi, Fariq Abdullah and Daksh Galgotia have one thing in common.”

“What is that?”

“A hospital,” he said, almost sighing. “They have been there, filled up registration forms there, at different time periods.”

“It could be a coincidence, right?”

“It could be, but this is the only thing that’s common between these people,”

“What is the hospital’s name?” She pulled out her phone and opened the note

pad.

He told her it was BLG Hospital in Prasad Nagar.

“How did you find out?”

“Called up people who were researching on them, they were some associates and as it turned out, you aren’t the only person interested in their deaths.”

“This is my news, Arjun.”

He laughed and she always hated that laugh. “Don’t worry. I stalled them. I mixed up information. You know, I would do everything for you.” There was again that emotional angle. “About everything,” he coughed, coming to his usual point. “Will you go out for dinner with me?”

He sure had his own agenda in helping her but he did help her, nonetheless. He deserved a little action. “Come to the point.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you want to sleep with me, just tell me you want to do that. I don’t have time to go through all the formalities of dinner and being romantic. If you want to sleep with me, come tonight, but after that I don’t want you asking me on dinner dates again. This is just a onetime thing.” There was absolute silence on the other end. It was quite hilarious for her but she knew that Arjun was not a bad guy. He had good looks, smelled well but his problem was that he was a loser.

She hung up the phone and waited for him while researching BLG hospital on the internet. She tried to look at the faculty and the staff to see if something was out of order but she found nothing. Then Arjun arrived. He had brought wine and some cheese at which she just frowned and took him to bed. Later on, the wine did help heal her soreness.

“That was great.” He laughed crookedly.

“Eh... huh,” she said as she got to pick up her phone that was on vibration mode, without glancing at the caller id. As she put the phone to her ear, she heard the creaking laughter on the other side.

“Hello, Mrs. Verma.”

Chapter Fifty Eight

Swati would have never thought of entering the Delhi Ridge at night, but this was it. She had to. She got rid of Arjun by saying that she was to sleep early for an early morning event, and after he was gone, she got dressed. She also got herself a bag in which she put a torch, a cell phone, pepper spray and a .22 pistol.

Then, she drove her Nano car to the Delhi Ridge in North Campus, hoping to find something, most likely another dead body. By the time she reached, she realized it was at a time when even the policemen were dozing off in their jeeps parked at the barricades.

Yama told her to go and find a watchtower at the Delhi Ridge. It'll be another big story, yet again. She could always say she was passing by though she knew that the police would be suspecting her by now and about how she got to know of the murders first.

The Delhi Ridge had a lot of openings but she went with the one that was opposite to St. Stephen's College. The watchtower, an old, dilapidated structure was in front of her. She remembered it from her college days when she and her friends used to come here to smoke weed. She slowly started climbing the stairs and finally reached the top. Along the way, she heard the coos of pigeons and hoots of the owl, but it didn't scare her. The pistol in her bag reassured her.

There, on the floor, leaning against one of the sandy walls of the dark and dingy watchtower, was a body with a face that had been melted. The flesh was burnt and only the bones remained. She felt like puking but somehow controlled the emetic spasms. When she had calmed down, she took out her phone to call the police but as she turned, she could make out a figure standing behind her in the darkness.

"Hello, Mrs. Verma," the man with the horns said.

Chapter Fifty Nine

Swati almost tripped and fell when she saw what she saw. She pulled herself back, with the revolver in her hand that she had somehow managed to take out. She pointed it at the man with charred skin and red eyes that were so deep and dark. He was naked waist up and had a muscular chest and thick arms but could not be called a bodybuilder. He had a noose in one hand and was wearing a skull crown with deer antlers rising from it. In the shimmering shadows of the ridge's darkness, his presence gave him a scary and dark vibrancy.

"You literally became Yama," she scoffed at him with the gun in her hand. "That's crazy or I should say, innovative. You do realize Yama was fat, right? Like big fat." She was nervous and she knew that when she was nervous, she blabbered.

"I didn't want to spoil my image," Yama said. His face wasn't visible except for the red eyes and his glimmering white teeth.

"You are early," He said.

"What do you mean?"

"I assumed that you would come in the morning but you came at this time and now, here we are, standing together."

"You mean you didn't expect to meet me here?"

"I don't meet a lot of people. I like to be alone. It's been really long since I have talked to someone, especially to a person, who I'm not going to kill afterwards."

That was an assurance she got right there. She felt a little better and she mustered up the courage to lower the revolver and yet keep it within sight for any sudden attack. But for some reason, she felt safe with him.

"What did you do to him?"

Yama laughed. It was a throaty, full laugh and she realized that he could be a handsome man with a good voice if he would remove this ridiculous, extremely frightening costume of his.

"He loved alcohol. I gave him iron."

"You burnt his face."

"He deserved that."

"So, you kill those who deserve to die? That means, even you deserve to die

because you are killing people."

He paused. "I'm not a bad man, you must realize that. I'm just a person striving to do good deeds."

"If you think this might impress girls, believe me, you have no idea how girls are," she joked like she always joked at times of distress. "Where did you even get what you are wearing?"

"I made it myself."

"Is that a human skull?"

"A replica," he said.

"So, you mean you don't kill for pleasure?"

He coughed so hard that she saw him spit blood on the ground. Was he ill? He sighed and said- "I am not in the best of health."

"Why? Lung problem?"

"Yes," he said. "And you thought I kill for pleasure?"

"Well, it sure seems like that. I mean, you with your torture methods, and your trying to put a fear into the souls of your victims without letting them know it's you who is Yama."

"Oh," he mouthed. "You heard my conversation with Mr. Rajpoot?"

"Of course, I did." She felt triumphant at the moment. "And I agree with you. This society needs a change."

"And then you ask me, why did I choose you from so many other reporters out there?" A thin, dark smile showed up on his face in the darkness.

"You want to make a change but you don't want to be a symbol. If you want this society to change, they need a hope and a person like you who they can look up to. Don't you think?"

He shook his head. "They are not ready. Like you, they all think I'm a killer that I'm not."

"You need to be a symbol out there. There will be those who will stand for you and look up to you. At least, I will."

"You believe in me?"

"I believe that these men deserved to die." She nodded. "And the men who rape women, or who murder them—they all deserve to die."

“I like your spirit. But I’m not a hero going after rapists.” He began to move.

“But you can be, don’t you think?”

He froze at that statement. His charred black skin was visible.

“You can be a hero if you really want to be.”

“In a while, you’ll say I need a cape and underpants.”

“I want to write your story,” she said, finally coming to the point. “I want people to know who you are, rather than your staying hidden in the dark. You might be able to stop these guys, these scums that you torture and kill, but with what I’m offering you, you also might be able to strike fear in the heart of every walking criminal in this city, so that before they even think of committing a crime, they’ll look around to see if Yama is there or not. They need to be scared and I can put fear in them, using your name.”

He was still frozen. And then he moved a little, finally revealing his face that was darkened too. His expressions and features were difficult to understand but she didn’t want to understand. She wanted the story, and she would get it somehow.

“You want my name out?”

“For the society.”

He straightened, squaring up to her. For a moment, she realized he might just attack her, but then he nodded and said-

“What do you want to know?”

Chapter Sixty

I got to know about the interview after two days. I had been mourning the loss of Fariq Abdullah, but I wasn't really sad about his death. His wife also died and it angered me more. He was found with his face burnt and destroyed completely, with his mouth and tongue dissolved with red hot iron. I'm not sure he deserved to die so horrifically but he did deserved death for what he did. There was more to his story. Apparently, he had married five times. Being a Muslim, he was able to do it and he had killed and buried all of them. He had written all his confessions in a diary, which revealed that the reclusive writer was in fact a serial killer of women. No one found out anything about him because the girls were mostly poor and orphan, so there was no one to lodge a FIR either. One odd thing about his death was that the body had been found without kidneys yet again, hinting at a possible involvement of Psycho Yadav in the murders.

The article shook me hard when Vardhaan showed it to me.

How did Swati Kaushik, the woman I thought I knew, find him? Did the mysterious and omnipotent Yama put her up to it? Did he now want his identity revealed?

I was sure that Swati must be getting questioned by the police about the true identity of a man dressed like a god, who was committing these horrific murders. *Should we call him serial killer, a psychopath or a hero?* That was the tagline of the article.

"Turns out that this interview was rejected by her channel, so she posted it on internet as everything is acceptable over the internet," Vardhaan tells me with a boyish smile on his face.

"What's the reaction?"

He scoffs. "The ministers are going crazy. Home Affairs want this matter to be settled as soon as possible. I think CBI is going to get involved in this now. Also, the Delhi Police has begun a manhunt with ACP Surya as the chief investigator. Things are going out of control. I think this is the right time to contact the police before we get into trouble as well because knowing about the murders and not reporting them is also a crime."

"No, not right now. He wanted this to happen. That's why he did it. He didn't do this for popularity. He did it for hope."

"You are getting way too much into his head, aren't you?" Vardhaan says. "I worry now. I thought I was the comic book geek here."

“How are the people reacting to this?”

“I already had it opened.” He pulls out his phone from his pants and shows me a YouTube clip. “After Swati mentioned he wore the same dress or whatever as the mythological Yama, people are going a bit crazy.” He then plays the shaky video for me where I see people marching to India Gate in the darkness with placards that read- WE SUPPORT YAMA. The worrisome thing, however, was that all of them were dressed in black, had painted their faces with black colour and were wearing metal helmets with fake paper horns

“Dear god.”

“He’s a hero, uncle,” Vardhaan says. “Or that’s what they think he is,”

“That’s what he wanted, right?”

“What about the criminals?”

“Many of them are turning themselves in before the god of death captures them with his noose. They are frightened by the very fact that a man dresses so weirdly and walks the streets of Delhi. I feel like I’m living in a comic book world,” he laughs.

“That doesn’t change the fact.”

“What? He’s playing us. He’s playing the world and making them believe he’s a hero.”

“You think he’s not?”

“I still believe he’s a killer and, most probably, mentally unstable.”

“Then why don’t we go and contact the police?”

“And what will we say? That we talked to him and we knew everything but we let two people, Daksh Galgotia and Rohan Khan, die because we thought they were pranks. No.” I shake my head, handing him the phone back. “We need to find him ourselves.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“We wait for him the next time he tries to catch his victim. We wait. And then when he gets them, we’ll attack.”

Chapter Sixty One

Swati Kaushik had had enough. After the article had been posted and gone viral, she had been called to the police station several times and she had to give innumerable statements. Her face was there in every newspaper, magazine and the news channels. She was given a suspension letter by her boss for not listening to him, but she didn't care because almost all of the other media houses were ready to take her in. And that was what she wanted, right? She did assure herself by saying that, but there was still this curiosity in her to know Yama's past. During the interview, she hadn't learnt anything about him other than his motives and his reasons for killing. That was clear to her already and she had just conveyed the same message in a formal way to the world.

The past was important and must be known. What made Yama do this? Behind that mask, there is a man. And behind that man, there's a reason. She hoped to find out both, no matter what. That'll be the story of a lifetime—what made Yama who he is? People look up to him now. Candle marches are being undertaken in his glory. Is he receptive about this? Not really. If it wasn't for her persistence, he wouldn't even care for people to know. But she wanted vigilantes like Yama, roaming freely and putting fear in those whom she feared. She had no reason. She was doing it because she believed in it. And that frightened her. Was her morality so twisted?

She finally opened the door that had been knocking for quite a while and found herself staring at the moustached and pot bellied, ACP Surya, who was chewing gum and staring at her.

"What do you want?"

"I want to ask few questions,"

He was with two of his constables. She didn't resist and allowed him in. He sat comfortably on the sofa while the others sat on the couch.

"What do you want?" She asked again, remaining standing.

"You can sit, madam."

"No, I think it was clear when I said that all questions should go through my lawyer."

"We are just catching on old threads, madam." He chewed his gum playfully. "We just want to know a few things about your dear friend."

"He's not my friend."

“He does give you the exclusive.”

“Well…what are you implying?”

“Did he tell you about the bodies?”

“Yes, he used to call me.”

“And you didn’t tell this to the police, why?”

“Because I wanted to be sure. I thought it was a prank or a coincidence,” she lied. “I thought I made that clear in the report.”

“You did, madam. We are just very worried what your little interview has done in the political world. They don’t like the craziness that is going around, you see.”

“I don’t care. The story needed to be out.”

“Of course, of course. You journalists think you are the greatest authority of this nation and we are all just babaji ka thullus here, right?”

“Why have you come here?”

“I just wanted to know if you have any details you might want to tell me about the man who claims he is a god.”

“I told the authorities that he was in the dark and was disguised.”

“In black skin?” He inquired with a face that showed his dismissive nature.

“Yes.”

“And the number you gave us is blocked, and you know that?”

“He calls me, I don’t. It’s a different number every time.”

“You are a widow, am I right?”

“What’s that to do with anything?” She responded angrily.

“No, just a question.”

“You are on thin ice, ACP. I can sue your ass for asking me derogatory questions.”

“Madam, the only derogative person here is you, supporting a criminal and a killer. Delhi has two serial killers walking free right now.”

She scowled.

“All right then,” he sighed with a crooked smile. “Are you lying to me, Ms. Kaushik?”

She widened her eyes, gasping for air to calm her nerves down.

“Can you please get out?”

He chewed for a while, wanting to ask other questions, but Swati did not allow him to do so, so he left with the constables. He was just here to have a fun time, she knew. He must be in the locality asking questions and had hoped to drop by, thinking it’ll be good sport. She hated men like that.

As soon she was able to calm herself down, she packed her handbag with her usual items plus a yellow pad for her to take down notes. She would have left minutes ago if it hadn’t been for the irritating ACP Surya crawling on her back. She closed the door behind her and left for BLG Hospital.

Chapter Sixty Two

Yama went downstairs to his cave. He passed his facility and slowly entered his haven, the place where he rested. He watched the cave walls and thought about how much time it had taken him to create this facility. He did it all by himself, since the beginning. There was water leaking and the stony floors were covered with dry blood. He had used oil colours to paint the walls and to stick figures made from images from the Bhagvat Gita, describing the tortures. On each wall, a figure being tortured had been set up in an innovative and a creative way.

He had seen the news and read the article featuring him. He didn't like it. He was being perceived as a superhero and a man with hopes and dreams for a better society. He did hope see a better society but his agenda was to harm the ones who deserved Narak and punish them in the same way as mentioned in the scriptures. And he would keep doing it, until he was tired. He didn't call himself a vigilante and he liked how the commissioner in his speech had made him sound like a maniac on loose. He was none. He was a god among men. He knew that. He was the only person fit for carrying out the correct judgments. He liked Swati. She had power and will but she saw a hero in the wrong man without knowing that he had lied to her.

He did like it. He did like it when those men suffered his tortures. Every scream played out a certain rhythm that helped in soothing his nerves and calming his head.

In the extension of the cave where he mostly used to hang people, he now had a synthetic tree put up. The tree was small but wide. It had no leaves but only branches and in the trunk of the tree that there were thorns and razor sharp conical spikes, so that if a person was sacrificed against the trunk, he wouldn't die immediately, but have an agonizingly long-drawn bout of torture. It was the new equipment he got made from the engineer that Brijesh had provided. It would be used soon and it would be fun to see a person against the tree crying, whimpering and begging to be killed. He smiles, watching the tree. The engineer had done a fantastic job.

But now, the time had come for his next victim.

Chapter Sixty Three

Swati was sitting in front of the head therapist of BLG hospital. He was a man with spectacles and a slight beard.

“You are the lady who had interviewed that person? What are you looking for, ma’am?” He asked with a cheeky grin.

“I was researching on the murders you must have heard of. The Ridge murder, the Rohan Khan murder case…”

“Yes, yes, committed by the man who claims he’s Yama.”

“Exactly.”

“It seemed funny when I heard it. Is any of it true? Have you met the man?”

“In flesh.”

“How was he?”

She sighed. “He was exuberant.”

She didn’t have anything else to say about him or a different way to describe him. “Anyway, back to the point. I saw in the victim’s personal details and found out that have all this hospital visited for therapy. Had you conducted the therapy?”

“Victims of Yama?” He raised a brow. “Rohan Khan, Daksh Galgotia…”

“Yep.”

“Not really. They were done by the earlier psychiatrist in the early 2000s.”

“Oh,” she said, scribbling in the yellow pad she had brought along. “May I know the name?”

“Hishma Rashid,” he said, spelling out her Kashmiri name. The name sounded familiar to her, almost as if she knew her.

“Have you met her?”

“Right before she left, we did have a conversation but just a short one.”

“How was she?”

“You want to have a psychiatric evaluation of Ms. Rashid?”

“You can say.”

“She seemed broken. Broken enough to understand other broken people.”

“How many patients did she handle?”

“The time we talked, she said there were over a hundred of them, and some were given to her by the authorities. This hospital is more of an asylum where the psychiatric department handles the nuts of this city. She got the bad. Now, it’s a little calm since I’ve come. The patients she had provided the therapy to, were her private ones, the ones who specially take an appointment.”

“Is there any way you can tell where she is now?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I told you, I just knew her by face and by a short conversation. She wasn’t the most interesting figure, rather antisocial I should say, but I don’t blame her. Now, when I see these patients and what horrendous crimes have been committed by them, I can understand why she became what she was.”

“But isn’t there a rule in the confidentiality clause that if the patient has done something that’s violent, the psychiatrist has the right to tell the authorities?”

“It does but it depends on the psychiatrist.”

He didn’t say it officially, but it was quite evident what he meant. Hishma Rashid decided not to tell whatever had been shared. Was Hishma related to Yama?

“Is she alive?” she asked.

“I don’t even know where she is,”

She had a theory. What if Yama was Hishma’s husband? What if she suffered some fate that led to someone becoming Yama?

But then, it was stretching it too far. What if all these victims connected to this hospital was just a big coincidence? It can be. And it can also be that Yama is just a person doing things out of fancy rather than out of reason.

“Is there any patient of hers still in the hospital?” She asked, “Where I can ask questions.”

He arched his brows. He wasn’t really excited about this. “What are you up to, Ms. Kaushik?” He asked.

“I am just looking for answers,” She responded, as genuinely as possible. “So will you take me?”

Tapasva Gandhi nodded.

Chapter Sixty Four

Swati wasn't really fond of the bald Tapasva. He was tall and handsome for sure, but too stoic for her. His face lacked expressions and he had a really, long nose.

"Have you been part of this hospital for a while?"

"BLG is divided into a general hospital and a rehabilitation centre with the biggest psychiatric ward in Delhi."

"So, it's a half loony bin?"

"I don't think that's a phrase much liked here." He squared his shoulders as he walked opening different doors. "But no, I don't just work here. I have a private clinic too, in Rajinder Nagar."

Swati followed him, watching men and women in white coats rushing around.

"These people—what do they most suffer from?" She stared into white, blank rooms where she could see some of them sitting, watching television or reading a book. They all had crazy eyes.

"Schizophrenia, bipolar, depression, the usual sort," he answered.

"Do they ever get cured?"

"These problems don't have a cure, Ms. Kaushik." He smiled a little. He did have a brilliant, wide smile that he instantly concealed. "They can be stalled but not cured. And that's the saddest part when I see all of them."

"Are there any rape victims here?"

"All sorts—women who went through all sort of trauma."

"Don't you get angry when you hear their stories?"

He almost chuckled. "I'm not a vigilante who paints himself and wears a crown of thorns, Mrs. Verma. You must understand that."

"You are right," she smiled.

"I remain objective with my patients. You see, they only have me as their listener. And they don't like to talk much, so we have to provide them all sorts of pleasures to open their mouth. There was a man, a patient of mine, who thought Shiva told him there was a treasure under a Gurgaon field. He dug almost hundred holes but never found that gold. That is how funny my patients are."

"They hear voices?"

“All sorts.”

He finally stopped in front of a white door and opened it. Swati followed him inside to find a narrow room with a small television set, and a man munching from his bowl of cereal.

“He is Samar Anand,” he said. “He suffers from depression, though he is growing better now.” He stopped and then said loudly, “How are you doing, Mr. Anand?”

Samar swivelled his head and gave a nod.

“You can talk to him. He has been here since Hishma.”

“What’s exactly wrong with him?”

“Lost his family during the Gujarat riots. He left for Delhi. He was sane till then until he started seeing them in real. Delusionary schizophrenia, we think. Hishma used to talk to him. I don’t know about what though. He has given us all the insurance money to stay here until he feels completely fine.”

“Can I talk to him alone?”

He nodded. “Sure, I’ll check on other patients till then.”

She took a stool and sat on it. Then she crossed her hands and asked, “Hey Samar…how do you feel?”

Samar looked away from the television and nodded. Then resumed staring at it.

“I would like to ask you a thing or two about Hishma Rashid.”

His mouth stopped chewing the serial. Slowly, he turned his face to her and said in a heavy, sophisticated voice- “What do you want to know?”

“I hear you were her patient. Can you tell me anything about her that she told you?”

“She was my psychiatrist,” he said, resuming his eating. “I hate her for leaving me. I want her to come back.”

“Where did she go?”

“She was my psychiatrist,” he repeated. “She asked questions, I didn’t.”

“But you were her favourite,” Swati lied, learning she had no choice but to be like this with him. “She said so to the other doctors.”

His face gleamed. “She did like me a lot.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Like my wife,” he grinned. There was sadness buried in his eyes. “She resembled my wife.”

“Great, so do you have any idea where she might be?”

“She didn’t tell me where she was going in her last session.”

“Did you ask her why she left?”

“She said personal time for herself. She wants to be a changed person, experience things, and to be a different human,” he said, chewing harshly. “Why you ask, woman?”

“Do you have any photograph with her?”

“She was my psychiatrist. We don’t click pictures.”

Damn. This was just not going her anywhere. She needed more from this guy, something concrete that might help her. She was stuck in a very perilous horror right now. She was stuck between mazes and labyrinths created by this world. She wanted to know about Yama and Hishma’s sudden disappearance might just help her understand the relation with Yama. But then, she might just be chasing the wrong road.

“Is there anything you saw during those sessions that made you think something weird about her usual personality?”

He looked up at the ceiling for a while. “Noida,” he said. “Dr. R.S. Mishra clinic.”

She instantly typed the name over on Google.

“Where did you find that?”

“Saw a paper cutting of the clinic advertisement on her table in the last session. It was hidden in her file but while she was out, I looked at it.”

She was impressed. “And you still remember?”

“I have good memory,” he grinned foolishly.

Swati glanced at her cell phone screen to find the name, Dr. R.S. Mishra clinic, only to learn that it wasn’t an ordinary sort, but that it specialised in surgeries.

A gender reassignment surgery centre.

Chapter Sixty Six

Find the hell to his sin and the sin to his hell.

Jagdish Taurani

7 hours

I keep staring at the paper.

Seven hours.

The idea of the hours growing shorter with each kill is just making me grow crazy. I don't know what to do anymore. I just wanted to give up and go on with it, probably just stay in one corner and let the killings happen, totally defying Yama's logic. But then, my conscience wouldn't allow it. That's the reason he sends it to me. He knows I would look at it and get down to work, not worrying about my health or my heart.

But lately, I had been having low blood pressure. My lungs hurt. I drink a lot of water to soothe myself as I had been straining myself to the point that I had suspended myself from Panthers for a while, cancelling all the consultations that came from Gagan. I even told Vardhaan to take the internship, enjoy his college instead of worrying about all of this. But he didn't leave. He remained there, hell bent on catching this maniac.

"What should we do now?"

"What we always do," I say. "Investigates and know what his sins are."

"I know what it is." There's a witty smile over his lips as he walks to the chart we had set up and points at a word, saying it aloud. "Asipatravana is a hell reserved for a person who digresses from the religious teachings of the Vedas and practices heresy."

"How do you know that?"

"Jagdish Taurani..." he says as a matter of fact before he pulls his phone and shows me all the links on Google, "...also called Guru Shiv, the infamous spiritual leader, going on fasts and all, one of the god men, representative of all the ancient gods as he says and performs all sorts of magic tricks. Hundreds of people visit him and want his blessings."

Of course, I had heard about Guru Shiv. He had been in controversy for quite a while as he used to consider himself God. But unlike Yama, he was more open about it and non violent. He sure used to loot a lot in the name of his temple that

he was building. He used to preach about nature and air and ground and some such bullshit but people from all over the world used to come to seek his guidance. There was a website, with a big DONATE button in the centre of it.

It was all a hocus-pocus shit, but there were many who believed in him.

“That could be true, Guru Shiv can be assigned to Asipatravana but we can’t be sure, you know. After what happened with Fariq, I’m kind of convinced that he’s manipulating us. This is too obvious, too much of a giveaway. He must be having an alternate hell behind this. We can only know about it if we go talk to him. Get all the buried information you have and we will leave now.”

“What about bua?” He asks.

It was true. Rutvi was alone today. Meena was out for the day wouldn’t be back till the evening. My children were in college and at work. Rutvi was fine today and she hadn’t been having delusions for quite some time but...

“I can leave her for a while. Meena will come soon.”

He doesn’t look too sure about it but then he agrees and gets down to working over the laptop. I am already dressed and I go to the living room where I find her watching her saas bahu serial. I sit by her side and I see her lively face. When she is not having her episodes, she is so peaceful and fair and healthy just like she was when I had married her.

“I’m leaving for some time.”

She doesn’t unfix her gaze from the television. “Where are you going?”

“Work.”

“You have been working awfully lot, you know,” she says. “Aren’t you afraid of leaving me alone?” A smirk comes up.

I smile back. “I hope you don’t do what you did the last time.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Surprise you with my overdose on sleeping pills? Not going to do that, don’t worry. I feel fine.”

I hold her hands. She instantly looks at me and our eyes meet.

“Are you sure? I can cancel.” To be honest, he wanted to stay with her rather than saving some asshole who doesn’t even deserve to live.

“Yeah.” She keeps her hand on my cheeks and gives a weak, tired smile. “I’m totally awesome right now, love. You do your work and at night, we will all go out for dinner.”

“For sure.”

“I am happy you rekindled your relationship with your son and daughter,”

“I am happy too.”

“How does it feel?”

“Feel what?”

“To know them now.”

And we both laugh at it. “They are odd and strange, but it’s okay. They get that from you.”

She raises her brows, acting nonchalant. I see how clear and unfazed she looked right now, unaware what horror takes her in when she goes into her episodes.

“And they get the attitude from you.”

“You fell for that attitude.”

“I had to adjust to it.”

I immediately hug her tight. I hold her close and kiss her on the cheek. I don’t want to leave. I think I’ve decided. This is the last bullshit person I’m going to try to save. After this, I’m done for the day. No more being a superman.

I only want to be a husband now.

Chapter Sixty Seven

Guru Shiv, according to his website, had his ashram on Gurgaon Sohna Road and his followers stayed there with him, doing meditation, listening to prayers, etc. Guru Shiv even had guards to protect him from faithless people, as he would say.

It takes me around one hour to reach and on my way I keep thinking about Rutvi and how I had left her alone at home.

Vardhaan says, “I like working with you, uncle.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You are the one person I think of when I think of a hero.”

“No one is a hero in these times, Vardhaan,” I respond.

“You come close.”

“How?” I ask, curious to know what his views are about me.

“You never think about yourself. You do this even though they are bad men. It’s easy to kill, you know, but it’s difficult to forgive. And you forgive them. Yama might be a hero for some people, but he resorts to killing as the extreme form of justice. Justice is not about being violent in dire times. It’s about being fair.”

“How do you know I forgive them?”

“You could’ve killed Kabeer but you didn’t.”

“I left him utterly broken though.”

He chuckled. “By the way, I’m going out with Pritika again.”

“Didn’t you hate her?”

“She grew on me with her mousy face.”

“I wonder how fickle you are.”

“I’m just a helpless and hopeless romantic,” he grins cheekily. “We are going to a movie this weekend if no more murders occur. I still don’t get it, though...” His tone instantly changes. “I don’t know how we are so calm about the murders. There are two serial killers, Psycho Yadav and Yama on the loose and we aren’t freaking out? Strange, isn’t it?”

“I think we have adapted to such a society.” I struggle a smile as I see the big farm house cum ashram that’s supposed to be Guru Shiv’s abode. I stop the car

under the peepal tree near a wide field, which lays barren but gives a brilliant rear view of the ashram. “Find out about him, anything that might be useful,”

“What do you intend to do?”

“I don’t know,” I say and I seriously didn’t. “But if we are going inside, we need to be prepared. I remember Guru Shiv being tangled in some issues. I want you to dig them out from newspapers. The internet must be concealing it somewhere.”

He nods. He uses his Tata Photon dongle to plug in the internet while I check up on Rutvi. She’s still there, wide awake, and waiting for me. After I keep the phone down, I leave the car and take a deep breath. I see men and women in white kurtas and dhotis as they roam around talking to each other. The ashram had an open space, visible from the iron grilled fences, which made it easy for me to have a peek and see what happens in that religious household of a godman.

“I found it!” Vardhaan yells to me.

“What?”

“It’s an old article from the time when he had just started his practices. Turns out, he was stuck with conspiracy issues. The American and the firangis, who used to come for his discourses, began to disappear. The authorities blamed him but they didn’t have evidence against him and he was saved.”

“What are the theories made up by the public?”

“That he raped them or sold them, the usual, you know.”

“He must be having something on him. This is too less information.”

“This is all I could get. There’s nothing…” he pauses as his face contorts. “LOOK!”

My eyes wander to where he gestures. A vehicle comes out of the rear gates and begins to leave. It’s a jeep and from the back, I could guess that Guru Shiv, with his white beard and freckled bald head, was travelling in it.

“He’s leaving the place.”

I sit down in the car, start the engine, accelerate and drive the car as fast as I can. “We are in luck. We might just be able get hold of him. Where is he going?”

Vardhaan says while looking at the computer screen. “I also found a blog by one of the followers of Guru Shiv.”

“What does it say?”

“It was buried in and difficult to retrieve but I was able to track down the server. Turns out, she is talking about what had happened and how her experience was. She was a Russian and was to be sold as a prostitute after Guru Shiv had held her at gunpoint, but she somehow managed to escape.”

“Did she say where she was held up?”

I finally stop the car as I see the jeep entering a small factory. The board outside the factory says MEHTA STEELS.

“Well...” he swallowed up as he points at the factory, “...that’s where she says she was forced to stay and starve until sold.”

Chapter Sixty Eight

Swati was in her house, sitting with a glass of scotch. She stubbed the cigarette in her hand and called up Arjun.

“You found it?” She asked frantically.

“I’m looking into it; I’m looking into it, chill,” Arjun said, in his smooth dorky voice. “By the way, how are you?”

Swati rolled her eyes and did not respond to his question. “Can you just get to the point and tell me what you found on Dr. R.S. Mishra clinic?”

“Well, I know the address,” He sighs.

“Duh, boy, it’s on the website.”

He sounded offended—*as if she cared.*

“It’s a gender reassignment clinic, mostly surgeries for men to women and women to men. It’s a small clinic.”

“Basically manufacturing transsexuals?” She spat.

“Wow, Swati. Can you be any more callous? They are humans too, you know.”

“I am just worried,” she sighed. She had to leave tomorrow. “What else did you learn?”

“There was a controversy about the clinic. You know how it is when you change to a new gender, you need a new identity — passport, PAN card, ID card, new driving license. Well, it was said that Dr. RS Mishra clinic used to provide that too and was caught in a sting operation and was freed only after a long court battle. He doesn’t do that now, I guess.”

It made sense. There was a triumphant grin on her face.

“What are you thinking, Swati? Do you think Yama is Hishma Rashid?”

“Who else would it be?” She said and began to explain as all the pieces took shape in her mind. “Hishma Rashid was insecure about her sexuality, so she went to this clinic after abandoning the psychiatric facility. She changed into a man and disappeared for months, gathering information, like me, about the victims. And now, she has returned with a male physique. That’s why I always wondered why he used to force his voice to be hoarse. Yama is in fact a woman.”

“That’s too farfetched. You are just making things up because you don’t see an

alternative."

"That's what I'm supposed to do. This is my only lead." She said. "I'm leaving tomorrow for Noida."

"I'm coming with you."

Eeks. She didn't need him. "You don't have to."

"Please?"

Arjun was a pestering pig. But frankly, she did need a person by her side during those long drives when she would have no one but the radio. "Fine. Just don't bring up that night."

"Why? It was amazing."

For you. "Sure, but no you won't bring it up.'

"Why can't we just go on a normal date…?"

"I don't do this."

And she hung up. She didn't do this why? She didn't know. But she knew one thing. Her instincts told her that Hishma Rashid might just be Yama. She must have experienced something brutal, something that made her hate men and then she changed into this vigilante but for that she had to be a man or she was actually unhappy being a woman. She had met many women, who desired to be the opposite gender because it made them feel complete. Was it the same thing with Hishma? She hated her skin. It could be true.

Tomorrow, she would find answers.

Chapter Sixty Nine

“He knew his timetable.” Vardhaan gasps.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s why we are here. He wanted us here at this time. He knew that Guru Shiv will make a round today at this time and we will follow him to find the hideout where he keeps the girls. He wanted us to be here.”

“But why?” I ask.

“It’s simple. He wants us to see what kind of people he kills. He wants us to believe that what he does is actually godly and right.”

“That means he wants us to sneak in and check out the situation?”

“Exactly.” He nods.

I think of doing that but leaving Vardhaan alone made me feel queasy. He was a big boy, mature and understanding, but he was in a pool of sharks. I didn’t mind my life anymore. I could die doing this, but I don’t want my sister regretting why she sent Vardhaan to me.

“When was this article published, didn’t the police react?”

“They did. There went to the warehouse, but found nothing. Guru Shiv must be having contacts in the police, who must have told him about the raid and given him time to move the girls before the raiding team arrived. Soon after that, that article was buried and was encrypted. I had decrypted it online.”

“You are fast.” I pat his back.

He almost blushed. “How’s your heart?”

“My lungs hurt and my heart seems to pump blood slowly, but I’m okay,” I grin.

“Should we go inside?”

“And do what?” I laugh as I stare at Mehta Steels and the remote surroundings.

“Stop them from whatever they do and call the police.”

“We can do that or we can wait for Yama to do that.”

“Wait. You want to see him in action?”

“I want to meet him.” I grit my teeth.

And I did meet him. It was I think after about two hours when I saw a silhouette arrive. Vardhaan had dozed off but I saw a quick shadow with horns stealthy

make its way into the factory.

Chapter Seventy

I pull out my.33 revolver and leave the car. Vardhaan follows me, when I instantly pull up my hand order him to stay.

“Call the police but don’t you dare move. Call them now.”

He started to look at his GPS online to check the coordinates to give the Gurgaon police for them to reach there. There would be trouble for us too and we would be asked many questions but I had a good, clean record, plus army background that might help us. But I needed to catch and grab Yama by the throat and ask him a few questions that I should have asked him much earlier.

I check the factor and its big walls to see from where I can break in.

Fortunately, there is a gate but it’s locked and chained tightly. Since I can’t just shoot the lock because of the noise factor, I grab a big rock to break the lock. As I am doing this, I am wondering how Yama must have made his way inside.

The rock makes a clattering sound and the lock falls to the ground. I open the chain and let myself in, into complete darkness. I survey my surroundings and find myself in a covered hall with many spiral staircases leading up to different floors in a metallic maze. The floors are empty but lead to a big wooden roof through which sunlight is creeping in. Mehta Steels must have once been a very industrious place, but now it smelled of dead rats and blood. And I knew where the blood was from.

I lurk in the shadows from where I can see the ground in front of me. I see Guru Shiv standing with his white kurta clad guards. Guru Shiv himself is in a yellow kurta over which he is wearing long gown like thing with a tight white belt that has been fastened over his thin belly. I can hear him talking to his men.

“Call them,” he shouts at one of the guards.

The guards, with pistols stuck in the back of their pajamas, move into a corner as a door opens to reveal five foreign girls with chalk white skins, pale eyes and stringy golden hair. They all are tied and look as if their spirit has been broken. They all have bruises and bloody patches all over their malnourished bodies.

“What is this?” Guru Shiv says with a frown on his face. “Why are they dirty?”

“We’ll wash them, sir.”

“Rajesh Balaji wouldn’t be happy if he sees them in this condition.”

Rajesh Balaji? I knew who that was. He was the Commissioner of Delhi. *Damn.*

I wonder how many other big shot men and politicians were under Guru Shiv? It made sense now, how he was always protected from laws and justice. He owned them with these girls.

“Hello, my dears,” Guru Shiv walks to the scared girls, who whimper like frantic chickens tied up in a crowded coop. “Don’t worry. You will serve the big people. They are nice. They’ll give you money and power. Don’t worry. You must hate me now, but I’m actually helping you. This is how the nature works.”

I look up and on the second floor, a guard moves forward, the one I had failed to notice earlier. He has an AK-47 in his hand, reminding me of the time I had used one. Then, I notice other guards on each floor. I should have been more careful. Guru Shiv is not stupid. He obviously has good security here.

The silhouette, which I noticed, moves towards one guard on the top floor and twists the guard’s head, making it crack. Then that shadow jumps from the third floor to the second, making some noise but not enough to evoke alarm. He twists another guard’s head and moves silently over to the other guard, whose back is to him, and he hits him on the knee and as the guard is about to yell, he grabs the mouth and pulls out a needle like thingy from his pants and pierces it down his throat.

Then his eyes fall on me from the second floor. And I see those brilliant, fiery red gems.

Chapter Seventy One

Yama watched Iravan Rajpoot there and there was a smile that spread on his face. As he turned his face, he saw a guard in black kurta staring at him, befuddled by what he was seeing. Yama's fingers touched his lips, shushing him a mocking way, as the guard began to shiver and yells loudly. The guard began shooting but Yama was quick. The noise had been repellent but Yama grabbed the gun, twisted it around and shot the guard in the chest.

The alarmed guards began to move towards him as he looked down to find Guru Shiv moving towards the gate, making his exit. Yama instantly fired a shot at the main door. Guru Shiv fell back.

Yama saw another guard coming in and Yama shot him in the head, taking the guards AK-47 with him.

He took another leap to the first floor. After making sure he was stable, he rolled over the floor and shot another guard, who had been surprised by his fall. He had killed three people till now.

He began to move downstairs, his eyes fixed on Guru Shiv, who was kneeling down with his arms up in defeat while his guards stood in a circle around him. No one paid any attention to the frantic girls.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Guru Shiv yelled. "Please, just leave me."

Yama grinned as he jumped again on the floor with the gun aimed at Guru Shiv's personal guards. The other two guards were rushing down the stairs.

"You are surrounded, freak," The guard said and grinned. "You aren't going anywhere."

And then there were two sharp shots. The two guards around Guru Shiv collapsed right there. At that very moment, from the shadows of the back door, entered Iravan Rajpoot, with his revolver smoking in his hand.

Chapter Seventy Two

I just saved his ass but I don’t know why I did it.

But then I don’t have time to think it through. I make my way forward as I see Yama grinning at me. He has painted skin and horns, all riveting up and glowing. He looked like Yama except that he had a tight, muscular physique.

“Keep an eye on him,” he orders me.

I don’t have time to protest as he runs forward where the guards are descending from and starts shooting them. One guard falls from the staircase while the other one stays there.

My hands shiver as I hold the gun to Guru Shiv’s head. It really does. It has been long since I’ve killed someone and as I stare at the two guards lifeless bodies, I realize they must have families and children who I had just robbed of a father. Damn. And I did it to save a coloured freak, whom I don’t even know.

Guru Shiv looks at me. He’s kneeling down and begging for his life. I glance at the girls, who are tied up, but their faces are beaming through their tears.

They see hope. They see hope in me and in Yama.

They are more important than these goons I have killed.

Yama hurls forward and shoots countless times until the bullets in AK-47 are over and the last guard is dead. He turns around, tossing the gun aside and moves towards Guru Shiv, but he stops when he sees me.

I am holding my gun, aimed at him.

Chapter Seventy Three

“You were waiting for this, weren’t you?” He said.

Yama sighed. He didn’t believe that the man, who had just helped him, could kill him. Instead of becoming scared, he decided he would be calm. He walked to the girls and with a knife in his hand; he started to cut all the binding and the ropes that had held them. After it was done, he glanced at Iravan and saw his hands shake and also saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

“Go,” Iravan said. “The police will be coming outside any moment.”

The girls nodded and rushed out as fast as possible like a flock escaping their hatches. They opened the door and were gone, while Guru Shiv was left standing between Yama and Iravan.

“You are caught. You are finally caught,” Iravan said. “You cannot escape now.”

“Let me leave with him,” Yama gestured to Guru Shiv. “I don’t want to hurt *you* .”

“You are evil, you know. You sound heroic but you aren’t. You are just like any other criminal in this society.”

“If you really thought I was evil, you would have shot me by now. Why didn’t you? We live in a world where there’s evil and lesser evil. And I’m the latter.”

“He deserves to be in the jail,” Iravan said pointing at Guru Shiv. “Not to your torture chamber.”

“He will be freed from the jail. He’ll claim insanity and coerced admission. He will blame it on us and he’ll be out, doing the same thing over and over again. Do you know how many girls have been forced into prostitution because of him? Do you have any idea about how many girls have been raped and killed just for his satisfaction? He deserves nothing but infliction of pain and misery. I don’t blame the authorities. There will be a day when our authorities will be righteous enough to punish criminals rather than freeing them. But for now, my authority is the supreme authority.”

“No, I won’t.”

“You leave me no choice.” Yama shook his head as he swung his knife at Guru Shiv’s head.

Chapter Seventy Four

Guru Shiv collapses and dies as blood oozes out of his head on to the floor.

For a second there, I think he might come for me, but he doesn't. I stay there, my gun fixed at Yama but I don't pull the trigger as I remain bewildered and satisfied. Why was I satisfied?

"You can say to the police that I contacted you. You'll be safe. I'll contact you again," Yama tells me as he passes me while moving towards the back door.

"Till when will you keep doing this, contacting me and making me chase around? It's gotta get over soon." I say with the revolver hanging loosly on my fingers. I don't understand why I don't stop him.

Is it because, subconsciously, I don't want to?

"It will be over. I promise you that," he says, with his charred back visible to me. "I like you, Mr. Rajpoot. I am grateful for your assistance today."

"Why me?" I ask him the last question, the one that troubles me the most.

"You'll know soon."

And with that, he exits.

Chapter Seventy Five

Swati was driving to Noida after picking up Arjun from Naraina when he informed her about the big showdown in Gurgaon where Guru Shiv was caught red handed and murdered by Yama and the only witnesses were Vardhaan and Iravan Rajpoot. She was absolutely stunned to hear that and wondered if Yama had called them there.

“What happened then?”

“They are still in custody but they say they have nothing to do and the girls’ testimony about the vigilante, Yama, doing all this has put things into perspective. They say they had been called by Yama to this place for a little surprise.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What else?”

“Well, he is still out there, so you still have the chance to tell his story. But exactly what do you want people to know from the story?” He craned his neck as he asked her. He had spectacles and a nosy face like the rat.

“His past.”

“And you think Hishma Rashid is his past?” He shifted uneasily in the passenger seat while she accelerated on the clear road.

“You don’t sound sure about it?”

“I still don’t buy it, you know. A transsexual vigilante, that’s new.” He arched his brows. “I adhere more to clichés nowadays.”

She laughed. She actually felt for a moment that Arjun could be genuine when he wanted to be.

“And you are doing this just because that guy Samar says that he saw a flyer or a paper cutting from the newspaper? It’s not even certain that she went there.”

“We don’t have a choice but to look into it. This is our last lead, otherwise it’s over. I won’t look any further into it,” Swati replied.

He sighed. “Hai bhagwan ji.”

“How far is it?” Swati asked.

“Half an hour,”

She tapped the wheel. It was a bright, gleaming morning and she didn’t feel tired from all the driving that she had done. She felt she was nearing the past of a person that might just unlock the mystery and free her mentally. She wanted to feel wanted, important and heroic and by doing this, she felt she would be the first person to have traced the origins of the mythical creature, who roamed these streets meting out his version of justice.

I can see you now, Yama.

Chapter Seventy Six

We are in the living room when Vardhaan rubs his shoulders awkwardly. He has two bags in which all the material that he had in the store room is packed.

“So this is it, eh?” Vardhaan says.

“This wouldn’t have been it if my sister hadn’t gone all batshit crazy about this issue.”

“I don’t blame her,” says my nephew. “Her son was in the middle of a battleground and she blames you for all of that.”

I know. I hadn’t been the best of uncles, but then what is a best uncle? My family is safe and they feel that I’m safe now. They said not to listen to Yama while on the other hand ACP Suraj wants me to be part of their task force and if Yama contacts me again, I should play along while they would follow and apprehend him. They believed me because of my army background, which always comes in handy in such situations. They don’t know I let Yama leave and that I had protected him and assisted him in killing those goons.

But Yama was not able to practice his torture. He would have done something horrendous and that would have led to serious problems. In a way, I felt I had won because I had prevented him from not doing something he always did.

Providing justice by harming and torturing is not the solution according to me. If I would have been Yama or had some serial mental illness, which I think he doesn’t have, I think I would have hurt the individual to the point that he would think thrice before he thought of committing another crime. I would break his soul, rather than his body. I wouldn’t torture his body. I would torture his mind.

But then, I wasn’t Yama. And I wasn’t a killer that he was. Or is he really? I am still not able to figure it out.

“But you enjoy with Pritika.”

“That I shall do. I’m going out tonight for a movie at Wave. I talked my mom into allowing me to go out at night. I said I’m going out with a responsible girl, so no problems.”

I chuckle. “I’ll miss you around. I’ll email you your certificate.”

“That is no worry. I learnt a lot from you.”

“Nothing about security and investigation, I am sure?”

He shakes his head. “About some things far more important.”

I begin to hug him but he covers himself up, so I back up. And when he begins to hug me, I lose control and I don't understand what it basically is. I'm confused. We both are confused. We pat our own hairs, mirroring the action of scratching the scalp almost simultaneously and give a high five to each other.

"Tell me when he sends you the letter again. I won't be able to accompany you, but I'll be there through my cell phone."

"Sure." I smile.

He waves the last time and tells me that he'll meet me next time in a family party or something and then he leaves. I stay there for a while, feeling this sudden, empty hollowness. I know I'm going to meet him soon. He was family after all. And he lived in West Delhi too. But then, there was this certain hopelessness in me. I actually liked his company. I adored him. I'll miss him and I'll miss his boyish charms, his quick wit, his fast typing and his flawless hacking.

Till we see each other again.

Chapter Seventy Eight

Yama waited.

He did as he always did. He stared at the door. His bungalow was big, with an underground cave for his torture instruments and practices. There was a wooden staircase leading up to the first floor and from there another staircase that led to the second floor and to the terrace where there was another room. The living room was adjoining to the kitchen, separated by a single sliding door where he often used to cook vegetables. There was a long dining table with fruits and a candle-holder in between, in which he would light scented candles for aroma. Just opposite the table were two couches and a table in between. There was an LCD monitor put up on the wall and the window had long maroon drapes.

Yama sat at the table while his eyes were fixed on the main door. He tapped his fingers on the table top. He had heard the car stop outside and the opening of the main gate. The door wasn't locked because he didn't want it to be. It opened and he saw the only person, with whom he had a conversation occasionally, entering.

Brijesh Khanna with his cane and his ponytail looked handsome but a little annoyed. His face was constrained and tight. He tapped his cane as he walked to the couch while his guards stood still.

"Where are the kidneys?"

Yama coughed loudly. "I don't have it." He had failed to do so because Iravan hadn't allowed him to take Guru Shiv into his custody and that was the reason for this awkward meeting.

"You are disappointing me, my friend. What is this, eh?" He shook his head. "Tsk, tsk…when you came in, requesting me to ally with you, you were such a great guy, a man with a vision I should say. And now, look at you. You are pale and feeble as if someone had taken your life. When will you realize that when you came to me, you sold your soul?"

"I didn't mind it," Yama said, coughing again. "I have enjoyed your company and your alliance, but I choose to withdraw from it. Clearly, you can see that I'm sick."

"Your sickness is not my concern," he said without even glancing at him. "Your work is. As promised, I will take your kidneys and then I'll cut you into little pieces." At that, he swivelled his head and a plastic smile swept over his face. "Will that be fine for you?"

Chapter Seventy Nine

Vardhaan had been keeping his hand over Pritika's for quite some time, holding it down, then bringing it up and kissing it. He had never realized it would end up like this. Everything that happens to someone happens for a reason, he thought. He had learnt as much as he wanted to about Yama and now he wanted to feel safe and secure for Pritika and his mother. He would be safe. For now.

After the movie, they were outside the Waves Mall Complex in Rajouri Garden, under the stars, as they walked to their car in the empty parking space. He hadn't chosen to park it underground for the fares are way too much. He chose to do it somewhere out in an isolated place under the canopy of an old, broken tree. As he was unlocking his Santro, Pritika said to him-

"I hope you won't do it again, Vardhaan."

Vardhaan turned to look at her. She had open hair and was wearing salwar kameez and little bit of mascara over her eyes. He liked it when she went all traditional on him.

"I promise I won't, okay?" He lied.

"I was so damn worried when I heard you were at the Mehta Steels Massacre. Damn, that was ugly. How was Yama, this god of death, who killed my boss, able to do so?"

"I don't know. He sure had some chops."

"He's a bad guy hurting bad guys," she chuckled.

Vardhaan smiled. It was late night and yet, the crows were cawing. On the opposite side of the road, he saw Tandoori Palace, which was half closed but the light was still on. He began to open the car door for her when he noticed something; it was a shadow in Pritika's spectacles. He turned suddenly and missed the attack from a hammer by a few seconds.

He looked back. It was a moustached man with shaggy hair, dark skin and dirty clothes, who was staring at him with hungry eyes. He had seen his face somewhere. He really had. And then he remembered having seen his picture on TV when he was younger. It was a face that he could not have forgotten.

Psycho Yadav.

Chapter Eighty

Swati reached the clinic cum residence in Noida.

It was nine o'clock.

Swati knocked the door after having climbed four floors as the elevator didn't work. A woman opened it and the first thing she heard was some TV soap opera playing in the background. She smiled at the woman and said, "Hello, I'm Swati Kaushik. I am here for Dr. R.S. Mishra's clinic. Am I in the right place?"

The woman grew exuberant and exclaimed, "Come in, come in. I'll call him."

She entered into the garish flat of the doctor, which was decorated with religious artefacts. She saw a young kid, playing in the living room with his Power Rangers.

Dr. R.S. Mishra entered and said with a thin smile on his face- "I'm Rakesh, please sit down."

"We are sorry for barging in on you at this time."

"Oh, no, no, it's okay," he said as he sat on the sofa. He ordered his son 'Chintu' to go and play somewhere else and asked whether we would like to have either coffee or tea. Swati thanked him but declined the offer.

RS Mishra clinic was a big washout, Swati thought. It must have gone downhill after the court problem, causing them to go bankrupt. Rakesh's eyes were filled with utmost desperation, and he looked ready to do anything for money or work for now.

"We aren't here for a surgery, doctor," she said, being straight.

"Oh?" His excitement dropped. "What is it then?"

"We would like to talk to you about a former patient."

"I can't give anything information on them. It's the confidentiality rule."

Swati pulled out a bundle consisting five thousand rupees and kept it on the table.

"I hope your rules can be bent a little."

Chapter Eighty One

Yama waited for his moment. He realized that he had to say something strong, something... something that not even the closest people to Brijesh knew about.

“You can take my kidneys and burn me, but I must ask—how is Cosmo?”

Brijesh had always remained calm and composed and even when he used to threaten, he had a sense of honour about him. But now, his eyes widened with shock for a second before he pulled himself up. “How do you know about him?”

“How is your dog, Mr. Khanna?”

“You have been spying on me.”

“I spy on all my allies. Gives me the upper hand during conflicts.”

“You are gone, my friend.” He gritted his teeth. “You are so gone. I’m going to screw you hard. I’m going to lay you down there and hurt your ass so bad.”

“Isn’t that what you already do with Cosmo?” Yama pulled up his brows and raised his voice. “Poor Labrador—I wonder what all you do with him.”

“I don’t do anything.” He flared his nostrils.

“You have a relationship with your dog, Mr. Khanna. It’s called zoophilia.” He smiled.

“And you deserve the worst of hells.”

Chapter Eighty Two

Vardhaan had the time to grab the man's hand, the next time he had attacked but Psycho Yadav's arms were strong. They were hard and powerful. Pritika's screaming distracted him and in that moment Yadav landed a mighty blow on his chest. He fell back against the car as Psycho Yadav smashed another blow from his hammer right across his cheeks and Vardhaan felt his teeth breaking and blood spurting from his mouth.

"NO!" Pritika yelled. A dazed Vardhaan saw Pritika being pulled by her hair and pushed on the ground, right beside him.

The images remained blurred as he saw what he did with her. Each time he blinked and opened his eyes, it would have a different static image. The first one was him smashing Pritika's skull. Then it was the spray of blood over his face. Then those painful squeals were no more audible but he saw Psycho Yadav sitting close to her and pulling out a thin pocket knife. He began to slit and carve out Pritika's skin, as he began to eat each slice. He went for her kidneys too. He wanted to slit the head and eat the skull but that was difficult to do with the small pocket knife, so he cut her ears, his eyes remaining a furious blood red all the time.

Then, he went for him.

Chapter Eighty Three

“Who do you want to know about?”

“Hishma Rashid,” she said.

He licked his lips. “I remember her. She was my last patient before all of that happened.” He frowned.

Swati had her yellow pad out, as usual, while Arjun listened to Dr. Mishra calmly with his brows tightly down and his eyes fixed on the doctor.

“Did you see the reason behind why she did what she did?”

“Actually she did mention why. Back then, I had a proper clinic and I didn’t perform from my apartment, you see. Before every gender reassignment surgery, we had a psychological and psychiatric evaluation to make sure the individual, who is going through the process, is mentally fit. So, we asked her a couple of questions to make sure that her mind was completely fine and she told us the reason why she wanted it done. She had been raped, you see, but she was over it. It was long back, during her teens but she was fine now. She was a doctor herself and had graduated from a reputed university. It was a nice profile. But the rapes were embedded in her mind and it made her feel scared when she walked on the street. And that is why she wanted to be a man.”

“She wanted to be a man because she felt…unsafe as a woman?”

“That’s what she meant, but didn’t say. But we still went with it, for we wanted money and she gave a lot of it.”

“So, when she was a man, how did she feel?”

“She kept coming back to us, asking questions and stuff. I am sorry, I meant, ‘he’,” He giggled. “He had some pain issues that we sorted out and he was good to go.”

“Do you have her photograph?”

“I am sorry I burnt it all after the court problem. I didn’t want old memories creeping back.”

“About your court issue,” she began with a glance at her pad. “You were charged for providing fake identities after the surgeries. Did you do that with Hishma as well? I mean after being a man, she would have needed a new identity, right? Do you have information on that?”

His eyes closed at the moment. “Let me think. I worked with a guy in Noida

only, who used to help. He had sent me the details of Hishma's new identity and it'll still be in my Yahoo mail. I don't use it anymore but I used it during that time when it was quite popular. Now it's Gmail. I have more than eight thousand mails in there and they are all part of the past. You can have the email address and password and are free to scan around. I have no problem. It's all history now and has already been checked by the police twice."

Swati smiled at that. Dr. Mishra scribbled the required information on the pad. As Swati and Arjun left the flat, she looked at the email id. It read: *myloveismyself.*

Ugly people can be really narcissistic sometimes.

Chapter Eighty Four

Yama saw the bodyguards reaching out for him but he was already ready, unlike last time when they had grabbed him by surprise. He had learnt Krav Maga and nobody could bully him. He had learnt how to shoot well too. He had to learn everything to make himself the person he was today.

As the first one came forward, Yama knelt down and hit his knees, hurting the joints, while he quickly slashed the nerve on the guard's wrist, and slashed another one on his throat. The guard collapsed, surprising the other guard, who pulled out a gun, but Yama was ready for that as well. He pulled his own gun quicker than him and shot him straight in the head.

Then his gun was aimed at Brijesh.

"Oh god." Brijesh cried.

"I always hated that cane. Throw it away."

Brijesh instantly did it and raised his arms. "My friend," he coughed a laugh. "I didn't really mean to hurt you, you know. I didn't. I was kidding."

"Of course, now please move along,"

"Don't kill me, please."

"I won't kill you." He assured him.

Brijesh walked with his hands up, through corridors of Yama's house to finally reach a store room space. He opened the doors where a staircase led down to the basement.

"Where are you taking me?" He asked.

"You'll see, move along!" He ordered.

Brijesh descended the stairs as Yama followed him into the dark cave that he had built . Brijesh stepped forward slowly as if studying the place. Yama ordered him to just follow the light as Brijesh stared at the paintings on the cavewalls. Yama finally let Brijesh walk towards the room where the thorny synthetic tree had been installed.

"Isn't that what my engineer made it for you?" Brijesh asked.

Yama smiled. He thought of sending out a letter to make Iravan run around again, but then he shook his head. He didn't care about Iravan anymore. He wanted Brijesh to pay for what he did, even though Yama was part of it.

“Yes, it is.”

Chapter Eighty Five

The first thing I learnt the next day was the death of Vardhaan. He had been missing the entire night and my sister had been frantically trying to find him along with the police. His mutilated body was found a kilometre away from Waves Cinemas under a tree with a dead Pritika by his side. His face was carved with a knife, his heart pulled out, and his limbs torn apart.

The police claimed it was the work of Psycho Yadav, the crazy cannibal, who bludgeoned his victims first and then ate them. He had no reason for that. He just liked human flesh. Apparently, some people are just born sadistic.

The police, as usual, tell us they'll find Psycho Yadav and at that moment I realize how compromised they were. They had no power. They had no worries. They just said what they were supposed to say. It was only us who ever felt the loss. I even forced Zoravar to look into the case personally, take it to DCP and make known to everybody the threat this city faced.

We were all at the cremation ground. My sister crying uncontrollably, my son and daughter were sobbing and holding each other's hands. The only surprise was my wife, Rutvi, who was able to hold it all in. Her episodes were mostly out of tension but she was now able to control it and I was happy about it. I realized it was time for her to move on.

I was totally shattered and feeling anger, remorse, and sadness at the loss of my favourite nephew, Vardhaan.

I don't know what to do. And when I don't know how to carry on, I go to Tapasva Gandhi, to tell him my stories, my thoughts and my feelings.

I sit there at the usual chair, with my back hurting as I stare at the bald, bespectacled man holding his usual patient log in his hands.

"I am sorry about your loss, Iravan." He called me by my first name. I realize how smooth his voice is, like honey. It worked its way through one's nerves like a balm.

"I don't have anything today."

"Did you cry?"

"No," I shake my head. "I wasn't able to."

"Are you in denial, Iravan?"

"I don't know what I am in."

He shrugs. “What would you do to Raghu Yadav if you see him in front of you?”

I pause. “I would kill him.”

“Do you justify killing him? Will it make you happy?”

“Well, it’ll make him cry,” I reply.

“About Yama, the vigilante, who is now being asked by the media and the public to find Psycho Yadav. Do you feel Yama should do it?”

I raise my brows. “I don’t know. I would just kill him.”

He lowers his gaze. “Your actions shouldn’t be violent, Iravan.”

“Dr. Gandhi, I am not here just because it is our usual therapy session day. I’m here because I want to be out of it. I don’t want it anymore. In fact, I don’t need it.”

He narrows his eyes. “Why is that?”

“I realize, I must do something else than listen to someone else to understand my own conscience.”

“It is all right, I understand. You need time. As our last consultation if it is that…” he places his patient log on the table. “I would recommend you to go on a trip with your wife as she seems fine now and I presume you can carry on forward with her. You also have a good relationship with your children now. For me, I am seeing the glass half full.”

I struggle a smile. “That’s good; you want me to see the horizon.”

He crosses his fingers. “Shouldn’t we all?”

“I should be going now,” I say while getting to my feet. “It was nice to have consultations with you.”

“You are always welcome here, Iravan. You are a great client, a relief from all the usual people. You have finally elevated yourself to a different level which I must say is almost a more spiritual realm.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“I’ll just write you a certificate stating that your consultations are over. It’s just a formal thing, no worries.”

I nod as he walks to the other room. I look around at his room thinking it might be the last time I’ll be here. I didn’t tell him one thing, though and that was that I would be looking for Psycho Yadav on every street and on every corner to find

him before the police do and then I will drill bullets into his head.

I look at the patient log, the one he always scribbles on. My eternal curiosity about what really is in it, doodles or actual minutes of sessions, forces me to pick it up and open it. As I flip through it, I realize that this log has pictures. Each page had a picture on the left and a paragraph on the right about the person in the picture.

As I turn the pages to see what Tapasva has written about each of his patients, I find Daksh Galgotia’s photograph on the left side of a page.

Chapter Eighty Six

Arjun had been sitting in the same place while Swati was sitting beside him, looking through the emails to find anything related to Hishma. It had taken them three days and when they had finally reached the end of their patience, they found the name HISHMA RASHID.

After downloading the BEFORE and AFTER images of Hishma, Swati saw a bright and smiling face of a woman and a picture of a man with a bit of wrinkles, a square jaw and shaven head.

As she looked at the picture of the man, she realized she had seen this face somewhere. It was young, back then. She opened up the other downloaded files, the ones with the record of the driving license, the PAN card, the new address, the new date of birth and the new name.

She gasped as she realised she had seen the name and she had also talked to this person.

Tapasva Gandhi.

Chapter Eighty Seven

I keep flipping the pages, and as I do so, I see all the names of those who had been victims of Yama. There was Rohan Khan, Uday Prithvi, Kabeer Trivedi and Fariq Abdullah. There even was a man called Brijesh Khanna. And as I read through the paragraphs, I see there is nothing else there but their sins with the rightful punishment written under their sin. The entire patient log is filled with names and different hells and different sins. There were hundreds of sinners, the ones that were still yet to be tamed and tortured.

The horror strikes me in my gut and it becomes difficult for me to swallow. I realize Yama had been in front of me all along. Luckily, there's nothing about me in the logs except my thoughts and notions.

"Hello there," a voice rasps.

I turn and I see Tapasva standing firm and tall, grinning at me. "You must wonder about my voice talent?" He says it in a completely hoarse voice, like that of Yama and then he changes it to a girly one in which he sounds like a woman. "I love the look of surprise, I must say."

"You wanted me to see this, didn't you?"

"Of course."

He walks elegantly with hands at his back.

"Who are you?"

"You know me very well and you remember me every day."

"I don't know you." I stare at him.

"Remember Hishma Rashid?"

I shake my head. "No."

"The girl whose father you killed. I was too small then but you do have a bad memory, I must say."

My eyes widen. "It's…you…you…"

"It's okay." He waves it off. "You killed my father, you saw me getting raped but you didn't do anything. It took me time to get over it but I did. Then, I got bored and I became a man as I thought being a man had its advantages because you aren't in constant danger. You are safe. You are the predator. So, I became one."

“Was this the reason you chose me?” I narrow my eyes. “You wanted revenge?”

“You really think that?” He laughs. “When you first came in, I recognised you.” He coughs. “I was angry, sure, and I wanted to strangle you right then and there, but then you start talking about those regrets, the regrets during your army days and how you had changed. That was the time I realized you had become a better man.”

“But you don’t forgive?”

“I never do.” He coughs again. “But, you see, you got me wrong here. I am not looking for revenge, Iravan, I am looking for replacement.”

“What?”

“I can have my sweet revenge and lead you to become another dead body but that’s not fair to the people of this city. They deserve more. They deserve better. I can be selfish and kill you now...” He confidently muses, “...but they’ll lose a potential Yama.”

“How will they lose Yama if you kill me?”

He walks to me and places his two hands over my shoulders.

“Because I want you to be him now.”

Chapter Eighty Eight

It was of course Tapasva Gandhi. It all made sense. That's the reason he told her there was no file on her, nothing that might help Swati find out more about Hishma Rashid. He wanted to stall her. She thought she had even heard him call her 'Mrs. Verma' once at the hospital but she had overlooked it.

Now, here she was on her way to his clinic after having used her charm to get the address from the receptionist at the hospital.

You have a lot questions to answer, Dr. Tapasva Gandhi.

Chapter Eighty Nine

I climb down to the cave where he makes me follow him. I walk around and as I do, I stare the cave that has its own functions and has its own aura. So, this is where he tortures them. I even see a bloody synthetic tree at one end, but I ignore it for its stench is strong. I move to the other end where I find myself in a different clearing, wide and open, with chalk paintings made all over the walls. Only few beams of light filter on to the ground and dance like macabre shadows.

And in the middle, I see Psycho Yadav, spread eagle. He is unconscious, trickling saliva, and naked except for a cloth around his abdomen. A rush of anger and remorse crowds me as I see the killer of my nephew, Vardhaan, in front of me.

“I caught him on a pavement, sleeping peacefully with a cap over his head. He’s not really intelligent, so to speak. His sin is cannibalism,” Yama says. “Rakshogana Bhojana is his hell. His punishment is that his body will be cut wide and he’ll bellow in pain like Vardhaan.”

“I still don’t understand. Why don’t you want to kill me?”

“Because you are a nice man, and the right person to carry on my name,”

“Why can’t you continue?”

“I have lung cancer.” He signals his head, “I have been having chemo, but it doesn’t work. It’s weakening me. My doctor says it’s just weeks now. I can’t carry on like this. I need someone to carry this symbol forward. I want you to be Yama.”

“But…why those time limits and those names? Why did you want me to chase around?”

“Because I wanted you to see the immorality, the corruption, the horror and I wanted you to be strong. It was all a test, a training session, for the ultimate field operation. All of that has led you to this moment. Don’t hesitate. Grasp it. You are finally seeing your destiny in front of you. Embrace it. ”

“How are you so sure I will take it?”

“Because you really want to—and it’s your choice.”

“What about my family?”

“You can have a double life. Everyone has. I have stashed a lot of money for you to handle the expenses of your household. I have also written this house to you

in my will. It's yours. You can use it legally now, and you can use this cave too. The spray paint is a part of this cave, and even the horns. They are part of the symbol. And my log has all the people, who deserve to die for one reason or the other. It will help you."

"I thought…I'm…" I sigh. I don't understand what really is going on—so many emotions, so many worries and problems; I don't really know what I should feel right now. "I'm sorry I killed your father and I couldn't do anything…"

"That was you long back. This is you now. I've heard everything, whatever you felt during those consultations," he snaps in between. "You have changed for the better and that's why I want you to carry on with this title."

"So, don't you think that when you gave me another chance, people like…" I crane my neck towards Psycho Yadav, "...deserve another chance."

He coughs as a smile plays on his lips. "I was a different Yama. You can be different. There are no rules. You see, you are just carrying a symbol, a dark menace that haunts the underbelly of Delhi." He pulls out a dagger from his breast coat pocket and hands it to me.

"It is your choice. Either you can give Psycho Yadav what he deserves or you can give him a second chance." His hand sweeps on my shoulder. "The moment you helped me that day made me realize that you aren't exactly like me, but you too wanted to be a symbol. I guess, I was too extreme and I guess that this city needs a less tortuous hero." And with that, he begins to walk. "It's all yours now." His voice echoes as he moves far away from me.

"Where are you going?"

"For a vacation. I'm going to die, Iravan. I just hope I die while I am enjoying," he laughs and the echoes stop.

And now, I have the dagger, the power of a punisher, and the victim in front of me—the killer of my nephew Vardhaan, Psycho Yadav.

Chapter Ninety

Swati reached the big bungalow and after knocking hard on the main door for some time, she realized that the door was already open. She walked in and looking around, she saw the lavish environment of the bungalow which was absolutely empty. She looked around; opening doors, calling out names, but was not able to understand where everyone was. Finally, she reached the office or what seemed like an office where she saw a simple table and chair, the usual psychiatric setting. Then her eyes went to the dustbin and she stared at the blood stained napkins in it.

Yama had coughed.

He suffered from an illness, perhaps related to the lung or something. She walked over to the table, looking through stuff, books and awards, trying to find a patient diary but she couldn't find any. The patient log that every psychiatrist had was missing.

He had left. Disappointed, she drove back home and after resting for a while, tried to call on the number that Tapasva had called her from but there was no reply. Unreachable.

She turned on the TV news and saw that Psycho Yadav had been captured and delivered alive outside a police station. SHO Zoravar Patel was speaking to the reporters, who were bombarding him with all sorts of questions.

"We saw who did it. It was Yama that freak. He delivered Yadav and then escaped. It was just a shadow but the horns were visible."

"But he usually kills his victims, so why should he leave this psychopath for the police?" One reporter asks him.

Zoravar's slowly looks at the camera. His face is tired but at the same time also full of hope.

"Who knows? He might have changed," he says.

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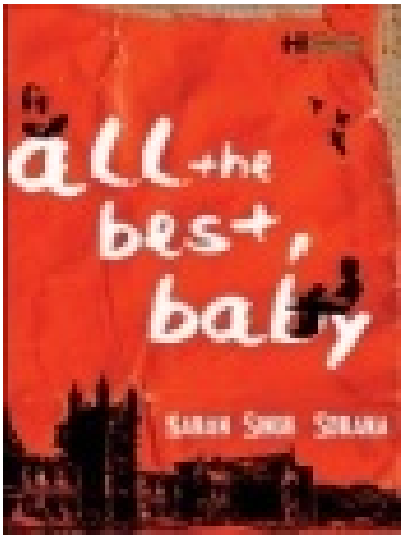

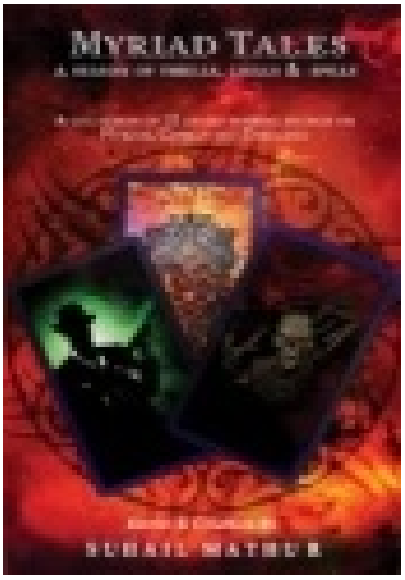

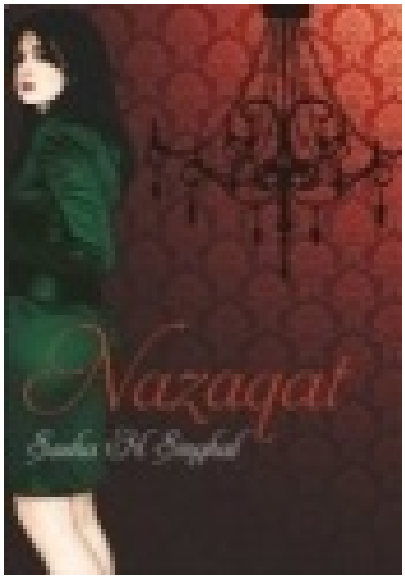

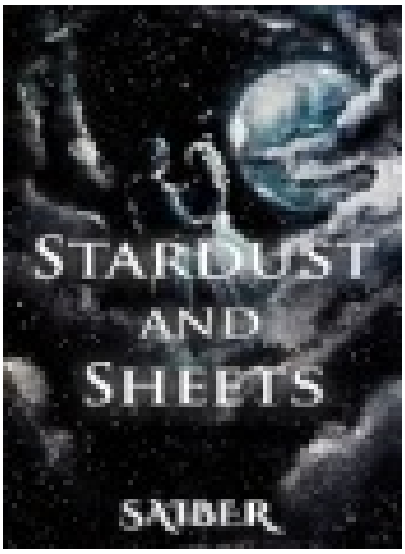

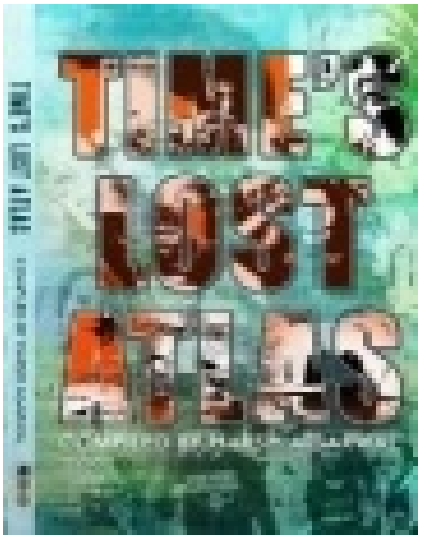
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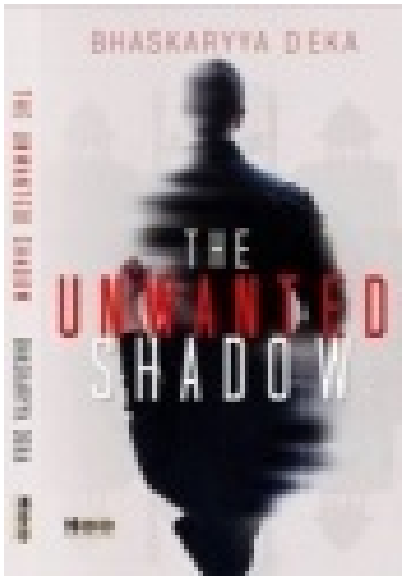
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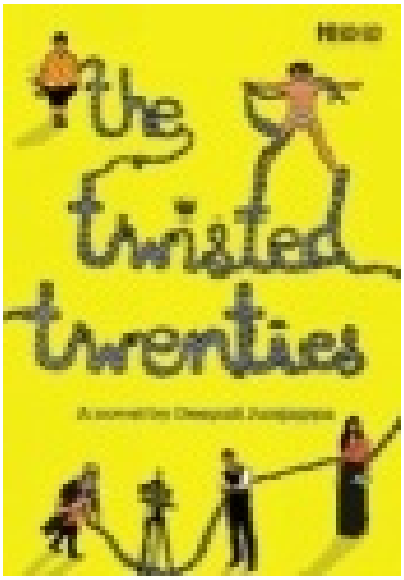
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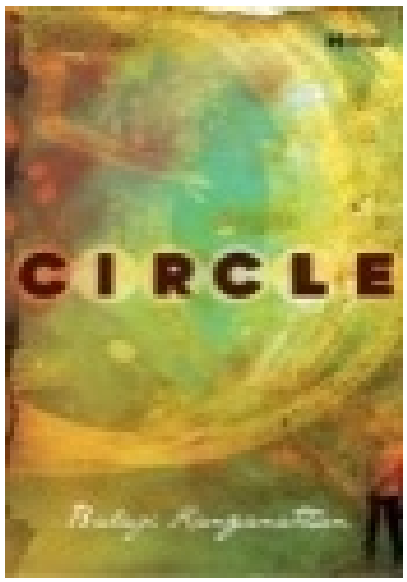
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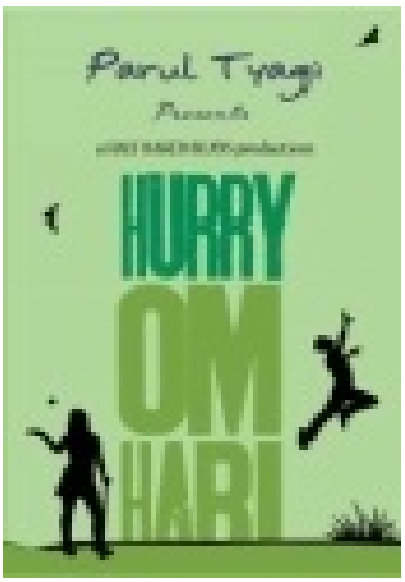
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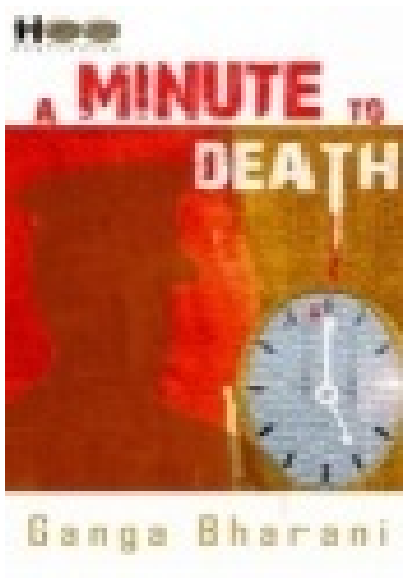
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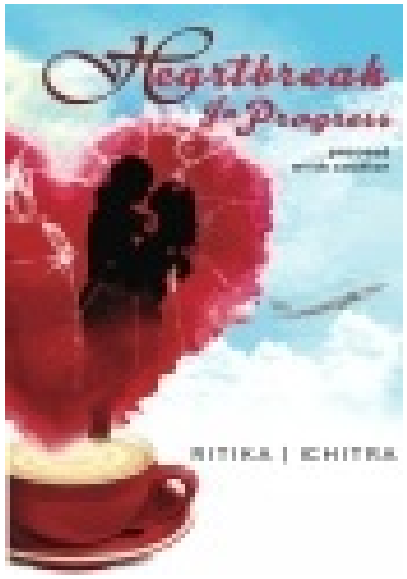
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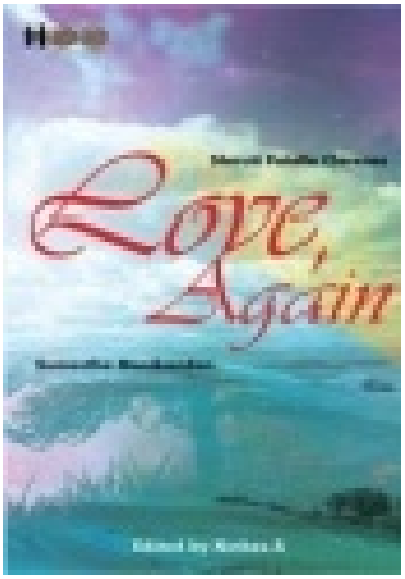
Love,
Again

THE

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